Strange Fire

By: Suzume CA

Yamiberry Book II: The trouble with happy endings is that they never tell you what happens next. After the events of Hand Me Downs, Hazuki, Chikaru and Tamao must learn to fulfill their promises to one another, while Kaname struggles to remake herself in a world she thought she knew. Yamibou/Strawberry Panic Crossover.

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DISCLAIMER ONE: I own neither *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* nor *Strawberry Panic* . Et cetera.

DISCLAIMER TWO: This is a further continuation of a story that began with *Red Bows in her Hair* and continued with *Hand Me Downs* . I can't promise the details will make a lot of sense without having read those stories. ("Wait, what the hell is this *Souma* thing? Wasn't he the guy in *Kannazuki no Miko* ?")

Strange Fire

by Suzume CA

I come to you with strange fire, I make an offering of love

The incense of my soul is burned by the fire in my blood

I come with a softer answer to the questions that lie in your path

I want to harbor you from the anger, find a refuge from the wrath

This is a message, a message of love

Love that moves from the inside out, love that never grows tired

I come to you with strange fire

-Indigo Girls

Part 1: Fourplay

The last place Hazuki wanted to be (or indeed expected to be) on the first day of the new semester was the office of Sister Mizue Hamasaka. But here she was.

As with her one previous visit, the sister spent the first several minutes of the closed-door meeting pacing in front of the tall Spican girl, shooting her the occasional thoughtful frown. Hazuki wondered if this was standard for such meetings: a test of patience, perhaps?

"I find myself in a quandary," Mizue said at length. "I have been placed in a situation that puts me in conflict between my role as a woman of faith and my role as the administrator of this dormitory."

While this was no end of confusion, Hazuki did not ask for elaboration, figuring that this would come regardless.

"Because this matter concerns you directly, Azuma-kun, I also find myself in the rare and awkward position of seeking the advice of one of my charges. I hope you understand that I would not do so lightly."

"Yes, Sister," Hazuki nodded.

Mizue faced her then. "I have learned the identity of the person who entered your dormitory room last semester, stole the registration documents for your sword, and then notified the police of your so-called transgression."

Hazuki let out a held breath. Apparently Kaname was still hard at work with her ongoing string of apologies. "Sister, I…"

"What was done to you, Azuma-kun, is nothing less than a criminal action, and this is where my conflict lies. By all accounts, the responsible party should be expelled from this school and duly prosecuted. However, considering that the perpetrator confessed these actions to me directly, seeking forgiveness for the shame that was brought to this institution, I find myself strangely at odds. I believe in forgiveness, Azuma-kun. It is intrinsically linked with my role as a woman of God. However, I am far from the only one to

have been wronged. And so I ask you: what would you do, in my position?"

"Sister," Hazuki said quietly, "Kaname-san already apologized to me for everything, and I've accepted. I've already forgiven her."

Mizue stared silently into Hazuki's eyes for several long moments. "What happened between the two of you over summer break, Azuma-kun?"

"We came to an understanding," Hazuki said, unable to fully conceal her smile. "I can't say we're necessarily ever going to be the best of friends, but I think we've reached a point where we can respect one another and move on with our lives."

"I see," the Sister nodded slowly, then arched an eyebrow. "I trust there was no use of force in this understanding of yours?"

"No, Sister, of course not. I mean… nothing more than a good kendo spar, anyway. It's amazing how that sort of thing can bring you together."

"Indeed," Mizue said dryly, and Hazuki could tell that the Sister knew very well that information was being withheld. "I likewise trust there will be no further… duels?"

"No duels, Sister. Though we intend to continue the friendly spars."

"As long as everything remains… *friendly*, then," the sister nodded. "However, I'm sure you will understand that if I hear otherwise, severe disciplinary actions will be taken. While Kenjyo-kun seemed sincere enough in her apology, her resignation from the student council was wholly unexpected, and I would be greatly disturbed to learn that she had been intimidated into these actions."

Hazuki literally rocked back on her heels. "She… resigned from the council?" she whispered, eyes wide.

The Sister studied her reaction carefully. "You didn't know, did you?" she asked, sounding as close to surprised as Hazuki had ever heard her.

"No, Sister."

After a thoughtful pause, Mizue resumed her pacing. "Until the change is announced at the evening meal, that news is not to leave the room. I am fully aware of the speed at which rumor travels in these halls."

"I'll keep it quiet, Sister."

"Very good. You are dismissed."

Hazuki bowed, turned to go, then paused. "Sister," she asked, "who will be the new president of Spica?"

"That decision is out of my hands, Azuma-kun; the administration of St. Spica will select a replacement this afternoon. It seems most likely, however, that they will choose Kiyashiki-kun, based on her record of service."

"I see," Hazuki nodded. "Thank you, Sister."

After bowing again, Hazuki left the office with as much haste as politeness would allow. Maybe there was still time to find Kaname and talk her out of this.

Absently rubbing her aching head, Kaname closed the door of her dorm room behind her. For a moment, she just stood there in the welcome silence and breathed deeply. Not that this room was a place of complete safety anymore, of course, but after the series of meetings she'd just endured, it would do as a bolt-hole for now. At least she'd have the place to herself for a time while Momomi met with the administrators. Even a few minutes of quiet would be a relief at this point.

Her eyes popped open, however, as an unexpected voice broke the silence, accompanied by the soft rustling of bedsheets. "Mmm, I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever come back."

Kaname turned to see a smiling face framed by blonde curls peeking up from her bed. "Lilith?" she gasped.

"The one and only," Lilith grinned widely, shifting under the covers, which were currently pulled up to her neck. "Happy to see me?"

"What are you doing here?" Kaname asked softly as she slipped off her shoes and put her book-bag on the floor.

"Waiting for you, of course," Lilith giggled. "Eve owes me about ten thousand years of favors, so I thought I'd take some time off and surprise you."

"Well, it worked," Kaname snorted.

"Poor Kaname-chan," Lilith frowned. "You look like you've had a terrible day."

"Not one of my best, no."

"Let's make it all better, then, shall we?" Lilith winked. She then pulled back the covers, and Kaname's eyes widened as she took in the sight of the Keeper lying there without a stitch of clothing.

"Lilith," she whispered, closing her eyes as she sat down on the side of the bed.

"Hmm?" Lilith replied, taking Kaname's hand and kissing it, sending a surge of green energy flooding through her.

"We really shouldn't," Kaname whispered, pulling the covers back over the shapely form in her bed before daring to open her eyes.

"I beg to differ on that opinion," Lilith giggled.

"Okay, then *I* really shouldn't," Kaname sighed. "Lilith, I have someone else here that I'm trying to work things out with."

Lilith made a sour face. "Is it Momomi in this world, too?"

"Yeah."

"I never liked her much."

"Maybe, but I *loved* her, at least at some point. We used to have something good, and… even though it's been a mess for a while now, I can't walk away yet. I need to know if there's a chance to get back what we used to have, and that's never going to happen if I'm sleeping with you during your coffee breaks."

"I preferred to think of it as a lunch break," Lilith growled playfully.

"You're not helping," Kaname sighed, but she smiled as she said it.

"Does she know?" Lilith asked in a more serious voice.

"About us? Yeah. I told her I met someone over summer break, one thing led to another, and…"

"And what did she say to that?"

"Nothing. She hasn't spoken to me since. For all I know, it might already be over between us, but I…" She closed her eyes. "I need to try, Lilith. Please understand."

"I do," Lilith said softly. She pulled back the covers again, and this time she was fully dressed in the outfit she'd been wearing back in the Great Library. "Even when we were together, I could feel the conflict. Eve did a number on you, didn't she?"

"No less than you did," Kaname laughed. "But it was damned confusing to have one angel finally convince me that forgiveness was possible, only to have another angel immediately give me something to be forgiven for."

"Ehh, you weren't *that* bad," Lilith winked. She then sat up beside Kaname, took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I must say, I was looking forward to a little more practice. Or even a lot more."

"Are you angry?"

"I wouldn't say that," Lilith said with a shake of the head. "You're just trying to do the right thing, even though it's with someone who probably doesn't deserve it, and is nowhere *near* as hot as I am, and… I can wait. I've had a lot of practice waiting."

"But what if things *do* work out for Momomi and me?"

"Then I can wait for that, too," Lilith smiled. "You're going to live a long time, Kaname-chan, and I'm not going anywhere."

Kaname closed her eyes at this reminder of her newly extended lifespan. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"Immortality can be a real bitch," Lilith nodded in agreement. "But it has its good side, too. You can have a nice long life with whosit, and still come play with me later. Think of it as a win-win situation."

"Nice way of looking at it," Kaname snorted. "Except for the part about having to watch her die."

"You're going to see a lot of people die," Lilith said in a much more serious voice. "All the more reason to remember the constants in your life. You have your three friends here in this world, for starters."

"I still don't know if I can call them my friends, really."

"There's time. And you've got this red-hot blonde waiting to jump your bones, so don't forget that."

"How could I?" Kaname snickered, giving Lilith an evil grin. "She keeps reminding me."

Lilith then leaned in to give her a warm, relatively chaste hug. "We'll be expecting you for tea once we've finished mending the library. Don't disappoint me."

"I'll be there."

"Good." The Keeper then rose and looked off to one side. "Time to go, Ken-chan."

A blob of yellow launched from a high shelf and wobbily flew to Lilith's shoulder. "Ah, disappointment," the round parakeet sighed. "Perhaps another time, lady samurai-han."

Kaname's eyes bugged. "Wait, have you been here the whole time?" She then narrowed her gaze at Lilith. "You were going to let him *watch?* "

"He was my ride," Lilith shrugged, giving Kaname an evil grin of her own. "Sometimes you have to pay the ferryman, right?"

Then, with a last saucy wink, both Keeper and bird were gone in a flash of green.

Not far from Strawberry Hall there was a short grassy rise with a particularly sturdy old tree at its summit. Tamao had long ago decided that this was her favorite Reading Place, and she liked to visit it at least two or three times a week, weather permitting. Today, the hot summer wind was making it difficult to keep the pages from flapping, but this time she found that she didn't mind a bit.

Rather than continue trying to read, she set her book down, stood, stretched, and turned to face the wind. After a few moments, she impulsively untied the ever-present scarf that kept her hair in check, and shook out her dark locks, letting the wind take them as well. Smiling softly now, she spread her arms ever so slightly and just felt the air rushing over her, around her, and seemingly through her.

After a long while, she heard a familiar voice from close by. "Tamao-chan?"

She looked to one side to see a puzzled but smiling Nagisa standing beside her. With a squeal of glee, she launched herself at her roommate and hugged her so forcefully that they lost their balance and fell to the grassy hill, Nagisa landing more or less on top of her. "Nagisa-chan! You're back!"

With a small "meep" of surprise, Nagisa rolled off of Tamao to sit beside her. "Tamao-chan, people are going to get the wrong idea!"

"Let them," Tamao grinned. "We know better."

"Yeah, but I don't want it getting back to Shizuma-sama that I'm the newest member of Tamao-chan's harem." Nagisa winked as she said the last word.

In reply, Tamao stuck out her tongue. "I don't have a harem. I've only kissed one of them, and it can't be an official harem until I've kissed them both. Anyway, where have you been? You missed your first day of classes!"

"We phoned ahead that I'd be late getting back," Nagisa sighed. "One flight delay after another. We should have been back yesterday morning, but we ended up losing a full day. It was terrible!"

"Poor Nagisa-chan," Tamao said with an exaggerated frown. "I can tell how painful it must have been to sit those long hours in the airports, with only Shizuma-sama to comfort you."

Nagisa gave a small half-grin. "Well, when you put it *that* way…"

"You look wonderful, Nagisa-chan," Tamao smiled, taking in the slightly altered appearance of her dear friend. She was certain that Nagisa's normally pale skin was a shade darker, and her red hair that much lighter. Obviously wherever she and Shizuma had been in

France, they had made a point to take in some sun. "I'm glad you got to take your vacation together after all."

"Me too," Nagisa smiled in reply, absently brushing her wind-blown hair from her eyes. "I've been looking for you since I got back, but I'm kind of surprised to find you outside, with all this wind."

"But doesn't it feel nice?" Tamao giggled, rising once more to her feet and turning back to face the rush of air. "Over the break I've been doing a lot of reading about T'ai Chi, and one of the authors said something that really stuck with me. Science tells us that our bodies are made of atoms, and every atom is made of these tiny particles separated by wide, empty space. When you think about it, most of what we are is that empty space, along with the energy that holds all those pieces together. So if you let it, you could feel as though the wind were just passing right through you."

"You think so?" Nagisa said somewhat doubtfully as she looked up at Tamao.

"I do," Tamao sighed happily. "Ever since the day we saw Naoko-sama again, I've not only felt the wind blowing through me, but I've felt like part of it stays with me always. No matter where I am now, indoors or out, if I close my eyes and let go, I can feel the wind blowing inside me, and it's wonderful. I don't know that I've ever felt so alive."

There was a long pause, and when Tamao looked down, she saw Nagisa gazing up at her with an unreadable smile. "I sense a poem coming on," the redhead said softly.

"Oh, most assuredly."

"Could Tamao-chan teach me?" Nagisa asked then. "Teach me to feel the wind blowing through me?"

"Anything for my Nagisa-chan," Tamao beamed, extending one hand to help the other girl stand. Still holding hands, they turned their

faces to the wind and closed their eyes. "So how was France?"

"Shouldn't we be… meditating or something instead of talking?"

"Not necessarily. The wind will still be there regardless of what we do. You look like you've spent some time at the beach, certainly."

"Yes, we did. And there are very… *interesting* beaches in the south of France."

"Oh, do tell! Interesting how?"

"Well… let me put it this way. I'd show you my tan lines, but… I don't actually have any."

"Ooh! Well… you *could* show me anyway."

" *Tamao-chan!"*

"Teasing! Teasing!"

Chikaru reached to retrieve a tissue from the box on her headboard and passed it to the girl lying beside her. "Your nose just started bleeding, Kizuna-chan."

The younger Lulim girl dabbed at her face, then looked quizzically at the spots of red on the tissue. "Huh. I wonder what brought that on?"

"Perhaps you were thinking naughty thoughts again?"

"Actually, for once I don't think I was," Kizuna mused, her voice slightly altered as she pinched her nostrils closed. "Must be all this dry wind we're getting."

"Must be," Chikaru agreed. "But I don't think the weather was what you came to talk to me about, was it? Particularly since you're alone?"

"No, it's not," Kizuna admitted, blushing slightly. "I need your advice, Chikaru-onee-sama. But… you'll tell me if I get too personal with the questions I ask?"

"Ask me anything," Chikaru nodded.

Kizuna removed the tissue, dabbed at her nose a couple more times to make sure the bleeding had stopped, chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then blurted out "How does a threesome work?"

"I see we're going to ease gently into the personal questions, then?" Chikaru giggled.

Blushing even more, Kizuna let out a short sigh. "I'm sorry, onee-sama. You don't have to answer."

"I don't know that I *can* answer," Chikaru smiled. "I'm hardly an expert on the subject: It's not as though I have years of practice."

"But you're the only one I know who's been in that kind of relationship and made it work. I mean, apart from the other two, because I know them, certainly, but I couldn't ask them this the way I can ask you, and…"

Chikaru held up one hand to stop the barrage of words. "Why do you need to know, Kizuna-chan? Somehow I doubt it's for salacious reasons. Well, for *only* salacious reasons, at any rate."

"We've been… well, we've been watching the three of you, Remon-chan and I," Kizuna went on. "And, you know, at first it was all for fun, like speculating which of you were bread and which were filling…"

"Bread and filling?" Chikaru repeated, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh, that's where…" Kizuna began, earnestly.

"I can guess," Chikaru interrupted. "Go on."

"Well, over the break, I had a lot of time alone to think about things. I mean, I still talked to Remon-chan on the phone all the time, but then I'd find myself lying awake at night thinking, and…"

"You're wondering where things are heading with you and Remon-chan and Kagome-chan."

"Yes," Kizuna nodded. "I mean, Remon-chan's my best friend, but… sometimes we're more than friendly. And Kagome-chan… she's such a little sweetheart, and way too innocent to think anything naughty about, but every day it's harder to imagine her not being a part of my life, and I know Remon-chan feels the same way because I've asked her. And so… what does that mean?"

"Well, first of all," Chikaru said patiently, "it doesn't have to *mean* anything. What you're describing doesn't make you a threesome: it makes you *friends* . Very *close* friends, dare I say even *intimate* friends, but friends nonetheless. Maybe you'll become more as you go, but there's no hurry. You're fourteen, fourteen and thirteen: there's plenty of time to figure it out."

"When did you and Hazuki-senpai and Tamao-senpai figure it out?" Kizuna asked in a small voice.

"Who says we have?" Chikaru winked. "We're *still* figuring it out, and I imagine we will be for the rest of our lives. We're really not that much different than the three of you."

"Except for the mind-blowing sex."

"Hmm, I daresay our actual sex lives can't possibly compete with whatever you're imagining."

"Are there… protocols for everything? Sort of like… can two of you fool around if the third one's not there?"

"Kizuna-chan," Chikaru said firmly, "we don't have all the answers."

"But you're *perfect,* " Kizuna sighed. "You're like the Platonic ideal of threesomes."

"And you're biased, but I'm glad you've been paying attention in Philosophy, at least. No, Kizuna-chan, as much as I hate to squash your young imagination, sex is actually nowhere near the center of what we have. We're three women who've made a commitment that we're still figuring out as we go, but it's the commitment itself that's truly at the heart of everything." Chikaru smiled to herself as she thought about how much "figuring out" still lay ahead of her in particular.

"Then… that's how it works? You just make it up as you go along?"

"Well, if you want more than that, I'll tell you something I told Tamao a few months ago, when this all started to happen. In my opinion, the only way three people could ever truly share a long-term committed relationship is that each of the three needs to love the other two as individuals, and love the other two as a couple. So far, the three of us seem to be meeting that particular challenge. Speaking for myself, I love Hazuki-chan, I love Tamao-chan, and I think they're wonderful together. I *love* them… and I love *them* ."

Kizuna thought hard about this. "Well, I love Remon-chan, no question. And I love Kagome-chan. But…" she frowned. "I can't even *imagine* the two of them as a couple."

"There's a lot more to think about than who gets to be in the middle of the cuddle," Chikaru nodded. "But there's no hurry, Kizuna-chan. If you want to make a commitment to them now, start with the part about always wanting them to be a part of your life, and always wanting yourself to be a part of theirs. The rest will follow, one way or the other. Don't be in such a rush to understand everything."

With a slow nod of her own, Kizuna leaned in and let her senpai hold her. "Thank you, Chikaru-onee-sama. You're amazing."

"Mmm, no, I just have a reputation to live up to," Chikaru laughed. "Was there anything else you desperately needed to know about threesomes?"

"Well… it's hard to picture some of the, erm, *mechanics* of it sometimes. I mean, where do all the arms and legs go?"

"I think your nose is bleeding again."

"Whoops."

As the interminable day finally began to draw to a close, Kaname sat propped up on pillows in her bed, reading the same page for the fifteenth time while she pointedly tried to ignore the sounds of Momomi bustling about in the bathroom getting ready for bed. Her roommate and possibly off-again lover was up to one of her old tricks, where she very deliberately did everything in her evening routine as loudly as possible, as if making sure that Kaname could not possibly shut out her presence. It had been like this every time they'd fought in the past, but this time Kaname was in no mood to deal with the passive aggression. She'd told the truth, and she'd serve her penance, but that was all.

Finally, she looked up from her book to see, to her surprise, that Momomi was standing there beside the bed, hands on hips, glaring at her. To be honest with herself, Kaname wouldn't have expected a confrontation this soon into the stormy silence.

"Answer me this," Momomi said in a hard, edged voice. "Did you quit the council to make up for cheating on me?"

Kaname shook her head. "No, I did that for myself. But congratulations on your appointment all the same. You'll do well, I'm sure."

From her scowl, this was obviously not the answer Momomi had wanted to hear, but there was no sense lying to her at this point. "So

what is it, then? No spine for the job anymore?"

"No patience for it," Kaname muttered, "but call it what you like."

Even though her bed was only a few feet away, Momomi managed to flounce into it. Kaname almost smiled in spite of herself. She had told Lilith the truth that afternoon -- she truly wanted to try to make things work out with Momomi -- but she'd be damned if she let herself beg. Best to give it some time.

As it turned out, Tamao was the last of the three to arrive at Chikaru's room that evening, as she'd been up late talking to Nagisa about her trip, so it came as no surprise to see that Hazuki and Chikaru had started without her.

For a while she watched the two of them as they sat opposite one another on Chikaru's bed, eyes closed, hands joined, expressions of near-complete peace on their faces. Not for the first time, she wondered what miracle had brought her into their circle.

Then, as she watched, the hands closest to her unclasped and reached toward her. Tamao smiled, sat up on the bed, and took the offered hands in her own, completing their circle. With a rush of warmth, she felt their *Souma* surge through her, and felt her own join with theirs and flow back in response. The wind she'd described to Nagisa was joined now by Chikaru's familiar fires and the waters of Hazuki's rolling river.

Now, the expressions of peace were truly complete.

"Good evening, Tamao-chan," Chikaru whispered, even though no words were necessary.

Next: Run

AUTHOR'S SUBSEQUENT NOTE: Okay, so I have no real idea where I'm going with this, but that's how HMD started out, so what the heck. This may be less of a story than a series of vignettes or a collection of smaller tales of the second semester post *Hand Me Downs* . Or it may become something else. We'll have to see. At any rate, though, thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy the ride!

Run

I'm okay if I don't look a little closer

I'm okay if I don't see beyond the shore

I'm okay if I don't have to do the killing

Or know what the killing is for

-Indigo Girls

.

I don't need to fight to prove I'm right

And I don't need to be forgiven

-The Who

.

Part 2: Run

"Etoile-sama, would you mind staying behind a moment? I'd like to speak to you alone, if I might."

Hikari let out a slow breath. Part of her had expected this, really: the first council meeting including the newly installed interim Spica president was finally coming to an end, and she had hoped to get out quickly, but somehow she'd had the notion that Momomi would want to have words with her.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Chikaru, who gave her a reassuring smile before following the Miator president out of the council chambers. Since there had been no assistants at this

meeting, and since Amane was away yet again with the Equestrian team, this left Hikari and Momomi alone.

"What can I do for you, Interim President Kiyashiki-san?" Hikari asked, making sure to use the entire title without particularly emphasizing the first word of it.

Momomi had been smiling, but even as neutral as Hikari had kept her voice, the expression flickered at the use of the term *interim* . "When I met with the administrators yesterday, they gave me some troubling news. Is it true that you intend to step down as Etoile, and throw the position open to election again?"

"It's more than my intention," Hikari nodded. "I've already decided."

"You're entitled to keep the position after Ohtori-sama graduates, you know." This said, Momomi leaned closer and actually winked. "And let's be real: when you consider how often she's away, you do most of the work anyway, right? You should be used to operating alone."

"I know that I could if I chose to," Hikari replied, very pointedly ignoring the latter part of what the other girl had said. "However, I have no desire to serve alone as Etoile."

"Shizuma-sama did," Momomi reminded her.

"True, and I admire her for that now more than ever. But I'm not Shizuma-sama."

Momomi gave a melodramatic sigh. "Well, then, why serve alone? If it's going to come to another election anyway, why not run with someone else? You're well-respected as Etoile, and I'm sure you'd be re-elected easily regardless of who you chose." She then leaned still closer, this time giving Hikari a knowing smile that made the hairs stand up on the back of the young Etoile's neck. "With Amane-sama gone, I'm sure Nanto-chan would be happy to… fill in the void left by her absence, wouldn't you agree?" She waggled her

eyebrows suggestively, making it more than clear that she was referring to more than Etoile duties.

"Kiyashiki-san," Hikari said in a shaky yet frosty voice, "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Yaya-chan is my best friend, and I won't have you maligning her like that."

"Fine, then run as best friends," Momomi growled, rolling her eyes as her conspiratorially friendly facade cracked. "The point is, St. Spica finally has the Etoile position back, and you can keep it here, where it belongs! Do you want to see it go back to Miator, or God help us all, Lulim?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," Hikari sighed, even as a small part of her mind wondered where she was getting the courage to speak to Momomi in this tone of voice. "What is it about the Council President position, anyway? I had to put up with enough of this last year, and I'm not going to listen to it again. I ran for Etoile because Amane-senpai wanted me to be at her side, full stop. I didn't do it for St. Spica, I didn't do it for Tomori-sama, and I'm certainly not going to do it for someone like you, after everything you put me through last year!"

Momomi took a half-step back, a look of genuine shock crossing her face at Hikari's outburst. She quickly recovered her composure, however, and narrowed her eyes at the shorter girl. "You know very well that it was Kaname who tried to have her way with you."

"And *you* know very well that you had as much to do with it as she did. And at least *she* had the decency to apologize to me!"

"Fine, then," Momomi nodded slowly, narrowing her eyes further. "I was hoping it wouldn't have to come to this, Konohana-sama, but you leave me no choice. You're aware, I'm sure, that if you should step down, your term as Etoile will end before my own term as Council President?"

"I am."

"Are you sure, then, that you want to cross me, little Hikari, knowing how miserable I could make your life once you no longer outrank me?"

Hikari stared into the other girl's brown eyes as her jaw went slack. "You're threatening me," she whispered.

"You could think of it that way if you wish."

For a moment, Hikari was about to do what came naturally. She would let herself be cowed by this older, prettier, more confident girl. She would listen to fear. She would let others control her life yet again.

But then she remembered that incredible day when she had met an angel. The day that Kaname, of all people, had knelt before her in tears, asking her forgiveness. The day she had learned that miracles were very real.

"How dare you?" she said quietly. "How *dare* you say these things to me?"

"What things?" Momomi asked, giving her a look of exaggerated confusion. "I said nothing at all. If anyone asks, I'll tell them the truth: that I only asked you to reconsider your decision." The expression changed to a calculating smile. "Are you going to tell them something different?"

Before Hikari could say another word, the door to the council chamber opened, and both girls looked around to see Chikaru step inside, smiling sheepishly. "Hello! Sorry to barge in, but would you believe I left my bookbag? I'm getting more careless the closer I come to graduation."

"No trouble at all, Minamoto-san," Momomi said coolly. "Etoile-sama and I were just finishing our talk."

"Congratulating her on the sterling job she's doing, no doubt," Chikaru grinned as she picked up her bag from the seat in which she'd left it. Her eyes then went wide. "Oh, dear, it looks like I left this running, as well."

"Left what running?" Momomi asked, as Hikari looked curiously at the small object Chikaru had picked up from the top of her open bag.

"Oh, it's an mp3 player, primarily," Chikaru smiled warmly. "Hazuki-chan gave it to me. You see, along with playing back, it also has a recording feature. I figured I'd use it to record the meetings for future reference. Okuwaka-chan does wonderful work with the minutes, of course, but I love to have my own personal records. After all, you never know when they might come in handy." She said this last staring directly into Momomi's eyes.

The interim President first went pale, then flushed a dark crimson. "Well, then, I won't take any more of your time, Etoile-sama," she nodded to Hikari. "Good day, Minamoto-san."

As soon as Momomi left the room, Hikari let out the breath she'd been holding. "Chikaru-san," she whispered, practically collapsing against her latest guardian angel.

Chikaru gave the young Etoile a one-armed hug. "The Shadow Empress of Astraea is ever at your service, Etoile-sama," she said with a smile that managed to be both mischievous and kind.

If Hazuki didn't know better (which she did not, admittedly), she'd think that Kaname was avoiding her.

While this was in some ways refreshing after the events of the previous semester, things were different now, weren't they? She hadn't seen her now-former council president since That Day, in which everything had changed between them… hadn't it?

After a fruitless search through St. Spica proper, Hazuki turned her attention to the athletic complex, then the tennis courts, and finally the track. Here, at last, she found her elusive quarry in the midst of running laps.

"Good afternoon," she called as the older girl ran past, but Kaname did not spare her so much as a glance. Hazuki waited patiently for her to complete her next lap, then stepped out onto the track and tried to make eye contact. "Can I talk to you?" Again, she was studiously ignored.

Frowning to herself, Hazuki slipped off her shoes and socks, set them in a small pile on the infield, then took off after her former partner in dragon-slaying. Around the next bend of the track, she caught up. "I'm beginning to think you're not happy to see me," she said in as conversational a tone as their speed would allow.

When Kaname said nothing, Hazuki went on without her. "So. Here we are. You're running, and I'm playing the role of an annoying voice at your shoulder. This is probably a metaphor for something, but I'm not very good at those. Tamao-chan says she'll help me get better, but she's not here right now."

"Go away, Hazuki," Kaname said in a low voice as she made an effort to pick up speed.

"Oh, good, we're still on a first-name basis," Hazuki smiled as she once more drew alongside the other girl. "I was worried that I might be Azuma-kun again in spite of everything. Which reminds me! You're not really in as much of a position to call me that anymore, what with your resignation. What was *that* all about, anyway?"

"Thought you'd be thrilled," Kaname growled, increasing her speed to a full sprint.

Noting that they were about to cross what was usually considered the finish line, Hazuki checked her watch. "If you'd done it a month ago, maybe. Not so much now, though. I was looking forward to

having a president that I could maybe get along with. I think Chikaru's even more disappointed, though: she was beginning to think those council meetings might actually go somewhere now."

"It doesn't matter."

"We beg to differ, especially considering your replacement. Now I've got a council president who once tried to seduce me in the locker room. Very poorly, I might add."

"That was her idea."

"I don't give an airborne fornication whose idea it was. Have you told her about Lilith yet?"

"Yeah. What do you care?"

"I care, Kaname, because I'm worried about you! Did you really think it was a good idea to admit cheating on her and then put her in a position of even greater power over you? Don't you think she might try for some creative revenge?"

"It doesn't matter," Kaname spat. "None of it matters, especially the council. They're not my problem anymore, thank God."

By now Kaname was not sprinting so much as streaking. Hazuki once more picked up the pace to stay with her. "I'm sorry to hear that, Kaname. Because, you see, even after you tried to have me ostracized, even after you made sure everyone on the campus knew about my suicide attempt, even after you set me up for prison time and challenged me to a duel, I'd *still* rather have you than her. Because you're not *nearly* as bad a person as you think you are."

"I didn't get to be president by being a good person," Kaname said through gritted teeth. "Don't you get it? I don't *want* any of that any more. Endless meetings, pointless debates, everyone so puffed up with their own importance… Christ, this is Chikaru's third year as Lulim president? How does she *stand* it?"

"She has an incredible sense of humor."

"She has to, if she's put up with *you* for this long."

Hazuki actually cracked a smile at this. "There we go. That's the Kaname I know." She checked her watch again as they passed the finish line, and smiled as she noted that Kaname was still accelerating.

"Yeah, well, the Kaname you know is sick to death of it all, so if you're trying to get me to change my mind, forget it!"

"Fine. You know what else?"

"What?"

"The Kaname I know just ran the last four hundred meters in fifty-five seconds."

The former Spica president looked over in shock, but as she did she missed her next step, and would surely have wiped out spectacularly had Hazuki not managed to grab her mid-fall and send the both of them tumbling to a halt on the soft grass of the infield. Once they managed to disentangle themselves, Kaname sat upright, chest heaving from her exertions. " *Fifty-five seconds?"* she practically shrieked.

"Fifty-five."

"I've never broken seventy in my life! And I've been doing laps for the better part of an hour! That's impossible!"

"And yet you did it."

For a moment, Kaname looked extremely pleased with herself, but then she got a better look at Hazuki, and her expression soured. "And so did you. In your *uniform* . And *bare feet!* Could you at least have the decency to *sweat* a little?"

"Well, I've been doing this *Souma* thing a lot longer than you," Hazuki shrugged.

Kaname ripped out a few blades of grass and tossed them at the other girl. "How can you stand it?" she said in a growling sigh. "Seriously, how do you get through the day like this?"

"What do you mean?" Hazuki asked, feeling the sudden shift in mood and realizing that the time for humor was over, at least for now.

"What we did that day… fighting monsters, stopping an apocalypse, going to other worlds, saving people, hell even saving *goddesses*…" She shook her head slowly. "You spent a *year* doing that?"

"Thereabouts. I lost track after a while."

"And you're *happy* here?" Kaname went on. "How can you stand going back to school and trying to be normal after all that?"

"I never asked for any of it," Hazuki countered. "I did what I felt I had to do for Hatsumi. I spent almost a whole year never knowing whether I might have to kill something on any given day, or whether I might die before I ever saw her again. And maybe it turned out for the best with what we were able to do last month, but that's not a life I want back. I have everything I need right here."

"Easy for you to say, threesome," Kaname snorted. "We can't all have your good fortune, now, can we?"

"I'll admit to the lucky part, sure, but I don't think you've got it as bad as all that."

"Not as bad as all that?" Kaname practically shouted. "I'm on the outs with my girlfriend, I can't play tennis anymore thanks to having suddenly grown a conscience, and I have to pretend that going to classes and studying for entrance exams actually *mean* something after what you and I went through out there!" She waved vaguely to

the sky for emphasis. "We did something out there that… damn it, it made me feel more alive than I *ever* have, and now I have to act like *grades* matter to me? I want a sword in my hand again! I want… I want to be part of something *real* again."

"There's plenty of 'real' that you can do right here on this hill," Hazuki reminded her. "You want out of the political machine. Fine, I get that. But there was room for one ex-samurai in this school, and I daresay there's plenty that another one could do. You want to do something that matters? Try showing a thirteen-year-old girl how to defend herself against an attacker. Try teaching kids who may have never used a *kitchen knife* before about the responsibility of holding a weapon, and the self-discipline that it takes. That's *real*, Kaname. *That's* how I do it." She then smiled in spite of herself. "The two beautiful girlfriends? That helps, too."

Kaname snorted, but said nothing, so Hazuki went on. "And regardless of what you might think about how little you have here, there's something you're probably forgetting. You've got three other people who are going through a lot of the same things that you are, and who are *all* willing to be there for you. We can help you, Kaname. *Souma* is a weird thing: sharing it seems to only make it stronger. You've been given a gift by the creators of… hell, *everything* . Don't waste it. Swallow your pride and let us *help* you."

"Why would you want to help me?" Kaname asked, pointblank.

Hazuki stared at her for a moment, wondering if this might be sarcasm, but it slowly dawned on her that it was a very real question. Kaname honestly didn't know.

"Back in my world, the one I was born in," Hazuki said quietly, "I could count the number of friends I had on the fingers of one hand and still have five left over. Traveling the worlds, though, and having my eyes opened to what's really out there? That made me value the people who cross my path more than ever. I cherish the friends I made on the journey, and the ones I've made here. And in spite of everything that's between us, former Council President Kenjyo-

sama, you're important to me. As much as I love Chikaru and Tamao, you and I went through something together that only *we* can truly understand, just like we'll never truly know what they experienced in the library. I don't want that to go to waste."

There was a long silence, and at last Kaname nodded slowly. "I appreciate it," she said, as though the words were foreign to her. "I may need a little more time, though."

"Time is something we've got," Hazuki pointed out. "And the offer stands."

Kaname went on nodding, then frowned as she peered closely at something. "Did you know your feet are bleeding?"

Surprised by this, Hazuki checked both feet to see that they were indeed both streaked with blood. "Huh, I didn't even feel that," she said absently. "Another disadvantage of being off the road, I guess. I lost all my calluses." She then paused only for a moment before unwrapping the bandage from her left calf, tearing it in half, and using it to cover the cuts on both soles.

When she looked up, she saw that Kaname was staring at her uncovered leg, specifically at the scars of her one-time self-mutilation. "Shin splints, huh?" the older girl said quietly, but there was something in her eyes that hinted at a deeper understanding than Hazuki would have expected.

"I lied," Hazuki replied, simply. "Disappointed that there are no *yakuza* tattoos after all?"

"A little," Kaname smirked as she pushed herself to her feet and offered Hazuki a hand up. There was a brief but warm exchange of *Souma* as they clasped hands, and this, perhaps even more than the talk, gave Hazuki hope that nothing would go to waste after all.

"Do you think she'll ever come to join us?" Tamao asked as she settled to one side of Hazuki.

"Perhaps not for *this* part," Chikaru teased as she snuggled in on the other.

"Agreed," Hazuki chuckled. "But as for the meditation and the other training? I think she will eventually. If not, I'll keep bugging her."

"Do you think she's Earth?" Tamao asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

Hazuki and Chikaru exchanged glances, and when it became clear that neither of them knew what she meant, they turned back toward Tamao. "Earth?" Chikaru repeated.

"Well, the three of us are part of the whole guardian-healer-maker triangle, right? But we each perceive *Souma* differently. Chikaru, you're all about sparks and suns and fireflies, so you're Fire. Hazuki, you're definitely Water, with the way you describe it as rushing and flowing. And to me, it's definitely wind, so that would make me Air. So do you think Kaname might be Earth? Maybe that's how the four of us fit together."

Chikaru puzzled over this. "It's an interesting thought, but I'd more expect Hazuki to be Fire and me to be Water, based on our roles."

"I wonder what Earth would feel like?" Tamao asked, looking off into space and appearing as though she hadn't heard.

"Maybe like she's got millions of little pebbles bouncing around?" Chikaru grinned. "That might explain the discomfort when she first got it."

"Chikaru," Tamao frowned.

Hazuki covered the frown with a kiss. "We don't need to figure it all out tonight either, Tamao-chan," she smiled.

"I suppose not," Tamao smiled back, snuggling against Hazuki and reaching across her to grasp Chikaru's hand. Once more replacing the conversation with the push and pull of their shared energy, the three quickly and happily fell asleep together.

It had been another night of few words actually spoken, but plenty of messages being sent. Momomi went about her evening ablutions almost fretfully, and climbed into her bed without a good-night while Kaname once again sat up reading.

As much as it almost seemed a shame to break such a well-constructed stormy silence, Kaname did so. "I was thinking of joining Hazuki-san's naginata club."

Momomi rolled over and stared at her with narrowed eyes. "It's Hazuki-san now?" she asked suspiciously. Her eyes then widened hugely. "Oh, Christ, you didn't sleep with *her*, did you?"

"Please," Kaname snorted. "I'm just not her president anymore, remember?"

They held one another's eyes for a moment longer, then Momomi rolled back to her other side. "Do whatever you want. I was thinking I'd quit anyway, now that I've got more to do."

"I wish you wouldn't," Kaname said softly.

Again, Momomi turned to face her. "Why?"

"I just… wish you wouldn't."

For a moment, it looked as though Momomi might actually want to try and understand, but then her eyes hardened and she looked away. "Don't keep the light on all night again."

"Right," Kaname sighed as she set her book aside and reached to switch off her bedside lamp. She stretched out on the mattress,

clasped her hands behind her head, and thought about dragons, and danger, and endless bookcases filled with worlds she'd never see.

Next: Trust

Trust

We are swimming, we are floating

And in this moment we are beholden

To what it cost, to what it takes

For one perfect world - can we learn to live another way?

-Indigo Girls

Part 3: Trust

Amane was halfway to the door before Hikari even finished speaking. "That does it. We're going to the administrators, and we're telling them everything."

"Please, Amane-senpai…"

"No, no, wait. First we're going to find Chikaru and get that recording from her. *Then* we're going to the administrators. This ends, *now* ."

The senior Etoile threw open the door to their shared room, and was almost through before Hikari's voice brought her short. "Amane, *stop!* "

To her own surprise, Amane did just that. She turned slowly to face her young love, and the surprise turned to deeper shock as she took in the hard, almost angry look on that normally timid face. "Hikari," she said, making an effort to lower her own voice, "we have to do something."

"No, we don't. Please, Amane, don't rush off like this. It's over and done with."

Amane sighed as she closed the door. "We don't know that," she said to the younger girl. "She *threatened* you, Hikari. Who's to say she won't do it again? We can't count on Chikaru-san being there the next time."

"She won't do it again," Hikari countered, with an unusual firmness in her voice. "She wouldn't dare now that she knows Chikaru-san is on to her."

"We don't know that," Amane repeated. "She's crossed the line, and she needs to face the consequences."

"You know as well as I do that she could be expelled for this."

"Good," Amane nodded. "She's had it coming since last year."

Hikari shook her head slowly as she crossed the room to take Amane's hands. "Expelled in her last semester? Can you imagine what that would do to her future? The shame it would bring to her family? Amane, I won't do that to her: not for what might have been an empty threat. I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy."

Amane drew one hand slowly over her face, once again coming to the realization that she and Hikari, as much as they loved one another, sometimes seemed to exist on entirely different planes of reality. "Sweetheart, she *is* your worst enemy."

"All the more reason to forgive her."

To her credit, Amane tried to stop the derisive snort, but she wasn't quite fast enough, and there was no calling it back. Hikari pulled away, giving her a hurt look before turning away and crossing her arms over herself.

"Am I so strange for that?" the younger Etoile asked in a somewhat strained voice. "Am I the only one who *believes* what they tell us in church? Is forgiveness just a pretty word, then, with no place in real life?"

"Hikari, I'm sorry," Amane whispered. "I'm just worried about you. I can't stand the idea of someone taking advantage of you again."

"Do you think I'm weak, Amane-senpai?" Hikari asked in a tiny voice.

Too late, Amane realized that the ensuing pause had been too long. "No, not weak," she said, hoping that this would be enough to cover it. "It's just that you're so honest, and so kind, and people will want to take advantage of you for it. I've always been proud of you for the way you forgave Kenjyo-san, especially now, but… we can't count on everyone having such a change of heart."

"I can't hate her," Hikari said softly, and for a moment, Amane did not know who she meant. "I won't let myself hate her, or let myself want revenge against her. I won't become her. She may have threatened me, but I forgive her."

"But what if she doesn't stop?" Amane asked, desperate to get through to her love. She stepped closer and reached to put her hands on the other girl's shoulders. "Hikari… what if she… lays hands on you?"

With a blur of motion that took Amane completely off-guard, Hikari reached around, grabbed one of Amane's hands, and in seconds had the much taller girl on her knees, caught in an armlock. She tried to twist away, but Hikari tightened her grip almost to the point of pain, only releasing it when Amane gasped.

The equestrienne turned shocked eyes on her young love. Intellectually, she had been aware of Hikari's recent attendance at Hazuki-san's Self-Defense Club, but not in a million years would she have expected this as a result.

For her part, Hikari smiled her normal timid smile. "Then I'll forgive her. Of course, I'll have to ask her to forgive *me* for putting her on the ground, but I'm willing to chance it."

Tamao looked round at the familiar sound of Nagisa-chan calling her name. "Tamao-chan!" the redhead waved from across the student lounge, smiling as she hurried over.

"Where have you been, Nagisa-chan?" Tamao asked good-naturedly. "It's not like you to be late for lunch."

Nagisa stuck out her tongue as she took the seat opposite Tamao at the small table. "I went back to the room to check my email."

"Poor Nagisa-chan," Tamao giggled. It was for the most part safe to tease her a little about Shizuma's absence now that the two of them had other means of communicating. "This morning's email wasn't enough to tide you over until the evening?"

"Um, no, it was quite nice," Nagisa blushed. Tamao hid her own amusement the best she could. If nothing else, she was certain that Nagisa would never again make the mistake of opening an attachment from one of Shizuma's emails while Tamao was watching over her shoulder.

"Anyway," Nagisa went on, "there was another message from her, and it has to do with you."

"Oh? Did she find out I was watching this morning, then?"

"No!" Nagisa said, blushing even more brightly as she gently smacked Tamao's hand. "I mean, unless she reads minds, because I was too embarrassed to tell her. No, she said she wants to get together again sometime soon with you, me, Chikaru-sama and Hazuki-chan. She says she wishes she had more time to spend with us after… well, you know, *after* ." Nagisa waved the rest off, and Tamao couldn't blame her for not wanting to talk about dragons and world-ending cracks in reality in the middle of the crowded room.

"You had your vacation to get back to," Tamao reminded her.

"I know, but… she says she hopes the two of us and the three of you can keep making time to be together, and I think that's a *perfect* idea. We've had some… well, some important times with one another, and she loves the idea of making more, so she wants to take us all away for the weekend sometime soon."

"Oh?" Tamao asked. "What does she have in mind?"

"A hot springs resort?" Hazuki asked, nothing short of gobsmacked.

"That was the suggestion," Chikaru nodded, raising an eyebrow in amusement as she took in Hazuki's reaction. "Is this a problem?"

"A problem?" Hazuki parroted.

Chikaru lay back against her pillows and shot Hazuki a look of deepening mirth. "Well, you *are* my inscrutable samurai, so it's hard to be certain, but it sounds as though you're less than enthusiastic with the idea."

Hazuki gaped at her for a moment more, then smiled with no small amount of sarcasm. "Oh, of *course* I'm enthusiastic! The semi-obligatory visit to a hot spring, where the last barriers between us are shed as easily as our clothes, and where we spend the weekend soaking, complimenting one another's breasts, maybe getting a little free grope in as we celebrate our newfound skinship… What's not to be enthusiastic about?"

"Well, *someone's* been watching too much anime," Chikaru giggled. "Could it be that my Hazuki-chan is a closet otaku?"

"I didn't have much of a social life in *either* of my pasts," Hazuki glared. "But come on. Five girls in a hot spring, including four confirmed lesbians? Sounds like a hentai in the making."

"I simply *have* to tell Kizuna-chan and Remon-chan of this new revelation about you. They'll love you even more."

Hazuki flomped onto the pillows beside Chikaru and sighed expressively. Still smiling slyly, Chikaru rolled to one side to better face her. "I sense some inherent shyness," she chuckled, but then her expression grew more serious. "Is it because of your scars?"

"Not really," Hazuki mused. "Kaname's even seen them now. I'm not sure I'm up for telling the story to Shizuma and Nagisa, but it's not that."

"Well, you wouldn't much need to worry about Shizuma noticing the scars," Chikaru waved. "She'll be too focused on complimenting your breasts."

"How reassuring."

"Anyway, I've already had the singular joy of seeing you naked. And a joy shared is a joy multiplied!"

Hazuki took a steadying breath. She knew that her dear friend was only teasing, but it was still starting to grate a little. "Chikaru, please…"

"I'm sorry," Chikaru said immediately, finding Hazuki's hand and giving it a squeeze. "It's always paradoxical to see you shy. You're so confident in so many ways, and yet…"

"I have… *issues* with nudity," Hazuki sighed. "No, that's not fair to say. I have entire *subscriptions* ."

"Really, now?"

"I mean, even Tamao has only seen me half-naked."

Chikaru's eyes went wide. "Really, now?" she said again.

Feeling the heat rising to her cheeks, Hazuki briefly squirmed under that gaze. "We're still taking things slowly."

"Yes, but you're forgetting your duty, Hazuki-chan! How in the world am I supposed to vicariously enjoy your sex lives if you don't tell me about these new developments? So which half?"

"Top half," Hazuki muttered.

"Drat, I was hoping you'd say left or right," Chikaru sighed. "But top is nice! Describe."

"We were… well, we were kissing, and then we were petting, and… she asked to see me. I… showed her, she did the same, and… the petting resumed. Only… with less clothing."

Chikaru stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Oh, my dear, sweet Hazuki-chan. If the martial arts don't work out for you, I think you should pursue a career in writing for ecchi magazines. There's such *passion* in your descriptions!"

"It's not something that comes easily to me," Hazuki went on. "Nudity, I mean. I'm not even all that comfortable being naked around *myself* ."

"Not much experience with public baths, I presume?" Chikaru asked, again raising her eyebrows.

"None, really. And… growing up not knowing why I had these uncomfortable feelings when I saw other girls… well, I avoided that whenever I could. Locker rooms were sheer hell. The me from this world had a lot of health issues, but I wonder how much worse it was because I knew that if I had strength in my legs, I'd have to dress for gym like everyone else?"

"And yet you got in the shower with me without hesitation," Chikaru said in a very serious voice. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it was so difficult for you."

"Don't be sorry," Hazuki replied, squeezing her hand in reply. "You're right: I did it without hesitation. I could have said no, but… I trusted

you. And that's what it's all about, for me. Nudity is vulnerability, but to me, it's more than that. It's *trust*, in one of its most basic forms. At that moment, after everything we'd just shared, I had no problem with showing you my body. I knew I could trust you with that."

"Then… I'm honored," Chikaru whispered. "More than ever. Thank you for having trusted me."

Hazuki smiled. "Don't say it like it's past-tense. It's all still there."

"Hmm, the trust, or the body?"

"Both," Hazuki whispered, pulling Chikaru's hand to her lips and kissing it. "You know that."

"On some level, yes," Chikaru nodded, looking down at their joined hands. "But it's still nice to hear."

They cuddled closely for a moment, mutually enjoying the warmth, but Hazuki couldn't help but notice the growing discomfort in Chikaru's expression. "Have I crossed a line?" she asked gently. The boundaries between them were still fluid, after all.

"Hazuki-chan," Chikaru said quietly, "I'm very grateful for your trust. May I… may I ask for more of it for a moment, please?"

"What did you have in mind?" Hazuki asked. Her heart immediately started beating faster at the possibilities, but at the same time she knew that this was a delicate moment for both of them. She would let Chikaru lead the way.

Rather than reply with words, Chikaru disengaged her hand from Hazuki's, then gingerly reached to unfasten one of the middle buttons of Hazuki's uniform shirt. Still not meeting the other girl's eyes, Chikaru slowly slipped the hand inside.

After a long while, Hazuki broke the silence. "What are you up to?"

"Mmm, maybe getting a head start on that free grope?"

"You *can* move your hand, you know."

The hand in question immediately withdrew. "I'm sorry, that was…"

"No, that was fine," Hazuki assured her. "I meant you could *move* it, not *remove* it."

Smiling very slightly, Chikaru again slipped her hand into the unbuttoned gap of Hazuki's shirt. Hazuki closed her eyes, determined to enjoy the sensation, and the experience, for what they were… *whatever* they were. "And?" she asked at length.

"It feels… nice," Chikaru said in a nervous, slightly broken voice. "You know, they say this is part of human nature, to be comforted by curves. We're hard-wired to be reassured by roundness."

"Who exactly are you trying to convince?" Hazuki chuckled.

"Does it feel good to you?" Chikaru asked.

"Yes," Hazuki smiled, more than slightly amused at the sudden reversal of their roles. "I mean, even discounting the physical part, there's the fact that one of the women I'm in love with is touching my breasts for the first time. It feels *very* good."

"Well, the first time on purpose, anyway," Chikaru admitted. "You've probably noticed that my hands have minds of their own when I'm asleep."

"Dirty little minds, yes," Hazuki smirked.

"Mmm, more like comfort-seeking minds. Even without a sex drive to speak of, I've always… *needed* to touch. I've always needed that kind of affection. I knew you were different the moment I met you, and yet… you never had a problem with *me* touching you. I don't know that I've ever told you how grateful I am for that."

"You're babbling," Hazuki said gently. "But I understand. And all this time I thought you were the one comforting *me* with all the cuddles."

"I hope I was."

"You were. I've told you before: you brought me back to life."

For a while neither girl spoke further, and the only sound was the light tracing of fingers over fabric. Hazuki again closed her eyes and just let herself enjoy the unexpected intimacy of the moment.

This time it was Chikaru who broke the silence. "This is a bit more on the lacy side than I would have expected from you."

"I have my girly moments," Hazuki shrugged. "I can't wear a sarashi *all* the time."

"No, I suppose not. That would be a crime, to be constantly hiding that figure of yours."

"Chikaru," Hazuki said carefully, turning her face to look into those dark eyes, "as much as I could very happily lie here like this with you all day… how does this feel for *you?* "

"Still processing," Chikaru replied, rolling her eyes. It was obvious enough to Hazuki, though, that she was using her customary humor to mask her nervousness.

"Do you trust *me*, then?"

"Of course."

With a small nod, Hazuki let her own hand wander. She untucked the shirt of Chikaru's uniform, then slipped her hand inside, spreading her fingers over the warm skin just below the other girl's ribs.

Chikaru gave a sharp intake of breath, then bit her lower lip. "Um, one new sensation at a time, please?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"One at a time," Hazuki smiled, withdrawing her hand.

"It's not that I don't want you to; it's more that… as slow as you and Tamao-chan have been taking things, I'm probably going to need that and more."

Hazuki nodded slowly as Chikaru made a visible effort to re-focus on her own actions. It was hard not to wish that Tamao were here for this moment, and she remembered a very awkward conversation where this very topic had come up. They had decided between them that they would not pressure Chikaru, and would do their best to let her take things at her own pace, regardless of which of the two she might first open up to in this way.

"Thank you for this," Chikaru went on. "For your patience."

"Have you processed yet? I'd love to hear how this is making *you* feel."

Chikaru closed her eyes. "I feel loved," she said slowly. "I feel lucky. I feel happy that there's someone who loves me enough to hold my hand while I try to figure out this tangle in my mind."

"Two someones," Hazuki reminded her.

"Of course. It's the trust, though, that means the most. It's just like you were saying before about nudity being trust. To me, *touching* is trust. I… don't know that I've ever felt this vulnerable before, but you trust me, and… that makes everything okay. As long as you trust me, it feels like everything will turn out the way it should."

Hazuki sat up slowly, deciding that maybe she'd instigate just a little bit after all. She shrugged off her uniform coat, then began unfastening the remaining buttons of her shirt.

"Um, what are your intentions, Hazuki-chan?" Chikaru asked quietly.

"I'm trusting you more," Hazuki chuckled as she slipped off the shirt and let it join her coat on the floor. "Or… seeing where our two

definitions of trust might meet." She winked at Chikaru, then reached around to unhook her bra.

"Hazuki-chan, please stop," Chikaru said in a tight whisper, closing her eyes. Her hand, which had remained on Hazuki even during the undressing, slipped away, and Hazuki realized that she had indeed crossed that moving line.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, quickly refastening the strap and scooting toward the end of the bed to reach for her shirt. Before she could, though, Chikaru's hand caught hers and Hazuki quickly found herself being pulled into an almost desperate embrace. She settled beside Chikaru, gently stroking the other girl's back. To her disquiet, Chikaru was very slightly trembling. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'm sorry I pushed. Not ready?"

"It's less not being ready than being frightened out of my mind," Chikaru whispered.

"No, I get it," Hazuki assured her. "This is all pretty new and scary for me, too."

"Different kind of frightened, I think," Chikaru murmured against her bare shoulder. "Right now… it's like I can truly feel every ounce of how much I love you, and it's staggering. You letting me in like this, letting me touch you like this, and then… wanting to give me more? It's intoxicating, and it's… overwhelming, really, but…"

"But what?" Hazuki asked, trying to find Chikaru's eyes.

"It's not… arousing," Chikaru sighed, looking at the other girl with near-desperation evident in her expression. "I want it to be, and I'm trying to let it be, but… it's not there, Hazuki-chan. Not yet. And I don't want to go any further, because it would *kill* me to make you think I was finally ready, only to have to pull away at the last moment, and…"

"Chikaru," Hazuki whispered, tightening her arms around this dear woman. "It's okay. Honestly. I mean… I'm not so full of myself to think one fondle will undo years of celibacy and make Instant Lesbian out of you. I'm not *that* hot." She hoped the humor would be well-received, and was grateful to hear Chikaru's muffled giggle against her.

"You are, too. Poor me, who has two gorgeous women wanting to do unspeakably naughty things to her."

"Please. I don't know any of the unspeakable stuff yet; I'm making this up as I go along. I have the feeling Tamao might know more about the naughty, though."

"Can I ask again for your patience, Hazuki-chan?"

"Of course," Hazuki whispered in her ear, then kissed it for good measure.

They held one another for a long time, then Hazuki again broke away to reach for her shirt. Once more, though, Chikaru stopped her. "You… don't have to," she said quietly.

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure." She then gave a pale version of one of her normal smirks. "The bikini I put you in covered less than this, after all."

Nodding slowly, Hazuki once again lay back against the pillows, and Chikaru settled beside her, resting the side of her face against Hazuki's shoulder.

They lay in comfortable silence for a while, until Chikaru sighed hugely. "Damn it all, I *want* to be aroused, too."

"Well, do you want to know what I think part of the problem is?"

"That the pleasure centers of my brain are hiding from me?"

"Not exactly, but…" Hazuki tried to think of how best to say this. "That one night we meditated, you said you'd never felt climax before."

"Never saw the need," Chikaru nodded, repeating her words from that night.

"Right, so… do you even really *know* what makes you feel good? In that way?"

"Well… no, not *really* . I mean, I know what makes me feel good up here," she tapped herself on the head for emphasis, "but I've never spent any time, um… down there. I've read a lot about it, though."

"Ah, then it's true? You've never used your fingers to climb the stairs to heaven?"

There was a particularly long pause.

"That," said Chikaru, "is quite the metaphor. I guess snogging a poet is having an effect on you after all?"

"Actually, I can't take credit for it," Hazuki laughed. "I heard that one from Chou'un."

"Oh? And what, pray tell, led you to discuss the… forgive me, the ins and outs of self-pleasuring with your naginata master?"

"She, ah, walked in on me doing it once," Hazuki admitted. "She said she came into the wrong bedroom by mistake, but I think I know better."

"Ooh, I smell a story," Chikaru giggled, looking very much more herself. "What else did she say?"

"Well, the first thing she did was offer to help me finish."

"Oh, *really?* "

Hazuki could not help but blush at the memory. "That was when she, um, made it clear to me that she preferred women to men. But she didn't press much once she saw how uncomfortable I was. We had a really good talk afterward. I told her a little bit about Hatsumi, and how the thought of her was the driving force behind my quest."

"And the driving force behind something else you were doing, I imagine?"

"Hush."

"Hushing."

"Anyway, this was later in my travels than when I met you, so she… sort of helped me continue down the road you started me on. Helped me to let go of my shame and accept who and *what* I was. Along with showing me the particulars of the spear, the naginata and a good dish of menma, of course."

"With a soft laugh, Chikaru snuggled more deeply into Hazuki's shoulder, and perhaps not coincidentally more deeply into her cleavage. "Thank you again for your patience, Hazuki-chan. I guess I'm still on a road, too."

"We've got nothing but time," Hazuki reminded both Chikaru and herself. "Whatever you want to try, whenever you want to try it, I'm yours. And I daresay Tamao agrees, because she's said as much to me. Experiment with us as you please."

"Mmm, my lesbian training wheels," Chikaru grinned, but then the smile faded. "I hope I can find it, Hazuki-chan. There… may never be more than this, though."

Hazuki kissed her on the top of the head. "Maybe not. But this is nice, isn't it?"

"Yes… yes, it is."

"We'll make it work, the three of us."

"That's supposed to be my line, you know."

"I learned from the best," Hazuki chuckled.

Next: Ballad

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I do not own *Koihime Musou*, of course. For the record, it was during episode 1 of *Shin Koihime Musou* that Chou'un managed to slip that particular metaphor into the conversation. *At the dinner table* . Have I mentioned lately that Chou'un is *Awesome?*

Ballad

Are we looking at a lifetime of regret

Or just one little moment that we'll never forget

I said oh, there's a heartache for everyone

-Indigo Girls

.

Throw it down - the gauntlet of love

-Frankie Goes to Hollywood

Part 4: Ballad (of 32)

They stood at the rail station hand in hand, waiting for the arrival of the last invitee to the weekend getaway. Shizuma looked over at the younger girl standing beside her and gave her hand a squeeze. "What's on your mind, my love?"

Nagisa looked startled for a moment, then made a show of smiling at her fiancée. "Oh, nothing, nothing. I'm just… thinking of how nice it will be to see her again, that's all."

"Are you upset that she's coming?" Shizuma asked, seeing right through the act.

"No, not upset!" Nagisa immediately denied, but then her face took on an uncomfortable expression. "I just… thought it was only going to be the five of us this weekend. And you have to admit, there are going to be some things we can't talk about when we're with someone who… well, who wasn't there when it happened."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But when she called… I had to… I mean, I wanted to…" Realizing that she was explaining it badly, Shizuma turned toward Nagisa and took her other hand as well. "She's very important to me, Nagisa, and I've been a terrible friend. When she said she wanted to see me this weekend, I thought it would be better to have her come with us rather than have to turn her down or think about rescheduling. And I think it'll do her no end of good to be around some familiar faces again."

"You're right," Nagisa nodded quickly. She did not look convinced, but seemed at least to be trying. "Anyway, I'm kind of surprised that she's coming by train."

"I agree, but I must say, I'm glad to see it. This is the way she'd have preferred it, so maybe she's managed to assert herself." Shizuma paused in reflection for a moment, then grinned. "I can imagine her ruling the roost already."

At that moment, the next train pulled in, so both girls turned their attention to its doors, wondering if this would be the one. From inside stepped a tall woman dressed in an incongruously casual manner, wearing a simple sun dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a large flower on one side. Her hair had grown out somewhat since the wedding, Shizuma noticed, but most surprising of all was the wide grin that lit up her face as their eyes met through the small crowd. In moments, Shizuma had both arms filled with a laughing Miyuki, who hugged her tightly and unreservedly, right there on the platform in front of Nagisa and everyone. "Shizuma-chan! It's so good to see you!"

""It's - erm, it's good to see you too, Miyuki-chan," Shizuma replied, holding her old friend back at arms length and looking her over. While it was certainly a pleasant surprise to see Miyuki looking so happy, there was something almost unsettling about it, given the circumstances under which they'd last seen one another.

Miyuki, by this time, had already turned to Nagisa. "And Nagisa-chan!" she beamed. "Are you keeping my best friend happy?"

"Um, yes, I mean I hope so, erm, Rokujō-sama," Nagisa bowed, but then her face blanched and she looked helplessly at Shizuma. She had forgotten Miyuki's married name. Or more likely, they had simply never spoken of it, so she had never known it long enough to forget it.

"Such formality," Miyuki chuckled, laying one hand fondly on the side of Nagisa's face. "I'm not your school president any longer, Nagisa-chan. Please, call me Miyuki."

"Of course, um, Miyuki-sama," Nagisa bowed again, a little less deeply this time. She looked almost desperately from Miyuki to Shizuma, clearly surprised by the unexpected familiarity and affection, but Shizuma did not have any answers for her young love. This was at least as baffling for her: probably more so. It had been years since she had seen Miyuki look so happy and carefree. She looked for the wedding ring, and found it very much in place on her friend's finger, so she probably hadn't done anything reckless, but if not that, then what?

"So where are we bound, my dears?" Miyuki asked, adjusting the small travel bag on her shoulder so that she could take each of her former schoolmates by the hand. "You said something about a private spring big enough for six that overlooks *Amanohashidate* ? Sounds heavenly."

In a strange cosmic convergence sort of way, Hazuki reasoned, it made sense that the hot spring resort to which they had been invited was in Miyazu.

With Chikaru stuck back at Lulim on council business (but coming to join them on a later train), Hazuki and Tamao arrived early to get in a little sightseeing. Hazuki's last visit to this lovely seaside town had certainly left her little time to enjoy the scenery, what with the dragons and the hole in the sky, and two women with swords guarding the thin line between creation and Armageddon.

Perhaps it was morbid of her, but she wanted to see the church where those final battles had taken place, if nothing else then to remind herself that it had happened. It wasn't even the Miyazu of this world, of course, but there was something comforting about seeing the old cathedral whole and undamaged, and the streets surrounding it filled with normal weekend traffic rather than an endless sea of dragons.

Eventually, after taking a few looks around to judge the area while Tamao watched quietly, Hazuki crouched down and touched the sidewalk over a very specific spot. "I think this was where we hit," she said quietly.

"Where you… died?" Tamao asked.

Hazuki nodded up at the other girl, trying to smile in a reassuring way. "It was only temporary. Eve saw to that. And anyway, the most important thing was to drive the Devourer back from this world… though I wonder now if I would have done anything differently had I known we were essentially dropping him back into your lap."

"I'm not sure if it could have worked any other way," Tamao sighed. "Which is scary, because… you and Chikaru both…"

"I think we did pretty well for four mortals going up against a reality-destroying monster of godlike power, *Souma* notwithstanding," Hazuki chuckled. "And it all worked out in the end."

Tamao's next words came with apparent difficulty. "I know Eve promised that this wouldn't happen again if she has anything to say about it, but… do you think it could? Are we going to find ourselves in another… crisis like that, because of what we are now, and what we have?" She took a deep breath. "Am I going to lose both of you again?"

"I don't know, Tamao-chan," Hazuki admitted as she stood beside her and took her hand. "But I think we're safe for a while, at least."

"We've talked about how much time we have now, to figure everything out," Tamao went on, "but that's not necessarily true at all, is it?

"What's wrong?" Hazuki asked gently. "What brought this on?"

"I'm not sure," Tamao sighed. She then made a visible effort to shake off her apprehensions and smile. "I think I'm just nervous about this trip. I've never been to a hot spring before."

"That makes two of us," Hazuki snorted.

"I'll try not to look at anyone but you and Chikaru."

"Oh, don't worry about *that* . You crushed on Nagisa for months on end: you deserve a good eyeful."

" *Hazuki!"*

So if each lap were four hundred meters, then two and a half laps added up to a kilometer, but that would mean having to think in terms of fractions all the time, so perhaps it would be easier to think of every five laps as two kilometers, which meant that this lap, her eightieth, would be… open parentheses eighty divided by five end parentheses times two kilometers? So what, sixteen times two? Thirty-two kilometers without having appreciably slowed down? Not bad.

It wasn't great either, of course, because not even the monotony of running could dull Kaname's mind to the extent she wished it would. The track had been an occasional refuge for her in the past: the simplicity of putting one foot in front of the other for long periods of time used to work wonders toward making her forget. But not anymore. Was the *Souma* to blame for elevating her strength and endurance, or was it simply that her troubles up until now had been child's play compared to her current situation?

After taking a couple of cool-down laps, she eventually jogged back to the athletic complex to shower. At least this time she'd managed to build up a decent sweat.

To her chagrin, she found herself wishing she could talk to Hazuki about this, to compare notes if nothing else. Had it been the same for her, coming back to a mundane world with this thing inside herself, having to not only live with her own change but with the knowledge that she'd lost her loved one in the process? Their situations were strangely complementary, come to think of it: Hazuki had lost her goddess and yet found love again with a regular girl, and Kaname had lost the love of her regular girl and had a goddess waiting for her.

That was where the comparison fell apart, though, because Hazuki now had two girls who were a far cry from ordinary. Hardly seemed fair that the world had four *Souma* -bearers, but they were divided into groups of three and one rather than two and two.

She stopped that line of thought right away, because that would mean contemplating which of the three she'd want on her side, and something told her that to consider this choice for even a moment would be to invite madness. Letting out a frustrated sigh, she stepped under the hot spray of the shower and tried to burn those thoughts right the hell out.

There would be no talking to Hazuki or either of the others today, of course, seeing as they were in Miyazu with Nagisa and Shizuma, the latter of whom was probably trying to figure out a way to outdo the threesome by turning it into an onsen orgy…

To her disquiet, Kaname found that she could picture the scene all too vividly. "What is *wrong* with me today?" she scowled as she began scrubbing at her hair, almost as though that could somehow wash away the mental image.

Instead, she brought her thoughts back to the one who had become the center of her universe, but not in the way she had once been:

Momomi. Rather than a warm sun, her presence was now more like a black hole: a spot of emptiness that managed to suck the hope out of everything around her. Had Kaname made her that way?

More importantly, could she do anything to change it? Or was it time to give up and run to the goddess that she hadn't had the strength to resist the first time?

After several long minutes of standing under the spray, Kaname made her decision.

By the time Chikaru arrived at their reserved room, Tamao and Hazuki were already wrapped in broad towels and had their hair pinned up. "So sorry to be late, my darlings," she sighed as she took in their state of dress. "And why, pray tell, are both of you still here rather than soaking?"

"The others are already in the onsen," Hazuki explained.

"We just… wanted to wait for you," Tamao added with a smile and a shrug.

"You two should know better than that by now," Chikaru grinned as she tossed her travel bag to the floor and looked around the room. "Never delay a pleasurable activity while waiting for me. Where can I wash up?"

"That way," Hazuki pointed, indicating the door to the actual bathroom.

"Much obliged," Chikaru nodded in reply, quickly shedding clothes as she disappeared through the doorway. Moments later they heard the sound of running water as Chikaru quickly showered.

"Feel any more ready yet?" Hazuki asked Tamao.

"I suppose," Tamao sighed. "I'm just… oh, Hazuki-chan, I don't know if I'm going to be able to stop myself from staring."

"You know," Hazuki said vaguely, "a few months ago, after a particularly intense meditation, Chikaru and I had a shower together. And I stared. God, did I stare. And so did she."

Tamao blinked. "You told me about this once before. Why are you telling me again?"

"Because it wasn't anything like I thought it was going to be," Hazuki explained, wishing that she could find better words for it. Even after all this time, it didn't completely make sense to her. She remembered staring almost hungrily at Chikaru, but not in a sexual way: her eyes simply couldn't get enough of this woman who'd just been inside her soul. "Neither of us wanted anything physical from the other - at least not overtly - so it was perfectly safe and even very pleasant. We were able to share something very personal and even intimate without it being at all threatening."

Several moments passed as Tamao pondered this. "So you think this will be the same way? Since Nagisa-chan and Shizuma-sama and Miyuki-sama don't want anything from us, it'll just be something… safe and pleasant?"

"It had better be," Hazuki grumbled.

Before Tamao could ask what Hazuki had meant by that, Chikaru emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel of her own. "So, my lovelies! Shall we?"

"Yes, let's," Hazuki nodded, offering a hand to Tamao.

"We can do this," Tamao said quietly. "Maybe they'll have left their towels on, for modesty's sake?"

Chikaru opened the door that separated their section of the rented suite from the central courtyard housing the onsen, and the three

stepped through into the open-air patio overlooking the *Amanohashidate* land bridge.

"Well, it's about time," Shizuma laughed from her place in the steaming pool.

"Chikaru-chan!" called an uncharacteristically gleeful Miyuki as she stood up and extended her arms as though waiting for a hug. In the process of emerging from the water, she also made it abundantly clear that modesty was not high on her list of priorities.

"Lovely to see you, Miyuki-sama," Chikaru grinned. She then shot a wink over her shoulder at her two companions as she divested herself of her towel and hung it nearby. "And may I be the first to compliment you on your breasts this evening?"

Amane would be the first to admit that she was not the most feminine creature on God's green earth, but there were still a few of the frillier things she enjoyed enough to remind herself that she had two X chromosomes after all. One of these was lavender bubble bath.

Now if she could only find a way to use her vaunted Etoile powers to request a bathtub for their room that would more comfortably fit her long, lanky frame, it would be perfect. Still, there was nothing quite like a nice soak after a day of hard practice, bent knees or no. Maybe today she'd just stay in until she turned into the proverbial prune.

Or maybe, she thought with a small grin, she'd stay in until Hikari got back and see if perhaps the younger Etoile might want to join her. Pleasant as the thought was, though, she quickly dismissed it: Hikari was always too polite to interrupt her in the bath, even as much as Amane had tried to assure her that she would be more than welcome.

The grin deepened. More than welcome indeed, she thought, as images of a Hikari strategically coated in bubble bath flashed through her mind.

Amane shook her head vigorously. She wasn't sure why she had sex on the brain all of a sudden, but that sort of thinking would never do.

From the main room of the suite came the sound of an unlocking door, heralding Hikari's return. Best to wrap things up quickly, then, so that she could rejoin her sometimes overly conscientious little love.

To her surprise, though, the bathroom door clicked open, and Hikari peeked inside. "Um… Good evening, Amane-senpai."

"Good evening, Hikari."

"Um… may I come in?"

"Of course, love. Anytime."

After flashing Amane a small, nervous smile, Hikari crossed the small space and knelt beside the tub, her eyes never leaving Amane's own. "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about for a few days now."

"Go on," Amane bade her as she paused and looked away.

"Do you remember the day I told you about Kiyashiki-san trying to talk me into running for Etoile again?"

"All too well," Amane chuckled, remembering the uncomfortable feeling of being held in an armlock by her much smaller love.

"I… disrespected you that day," Hikari said quietly.

"What, by showing me that you can take care of yourself? I was surprised, certainly, but demonstrating the work you've been doing with Hazuki-san was hardly disrespectful."

"That isn't what I meant," Hikari sighed. "It was before that, when I was trying to stop you from leaving the room. I… called you by your name. I was upset, and I… forgot to call you senpai."

"You did?" Amane asked. "I… I don't remember."

"I do, though, and… it's been on my mind ever since."

Amane closed her eyes, wishing that she could explain to Hikari how little she cared about that, but Hikari was not finished speaking. "You see, I've always called you Amane-senpai, or Amane-sama, even in the months that we've been Etoile, and been… involved." She blushed slightly and cleared her throat. "Because you *are* my senpai, and because you're my senior, and I have so much respect for you, but…"

"What is it, Hikari?" Amane asked gently, after the younger girl trailed off.

"The thing is," Hikari said in a high, breathy voice, "I also… I love you… Amane. And I want to call you that, not just when I slip up, but all the time. So… may I call you by your name, and only your name?"

For a long time, Amane simply could not find her voice. How long had Hikari wanted to ask her this? How much bravery had she had to muster up to do so, in the bath no less? And most importantly… why hadn't Amane simply given her that permission ages ago? She knew full well how traditional Hikari remained in spite of their unconventional relationship, and she should have recognized that she would continue being formal until otherwise instructed by one so far above her. To her own shame, she wondered how much of this was Hikari's residual idol-worship, and how much of it was Amane herself enjoying the attention?

As painful as it was to be reminded that Hikari might still think of herself as beneath Amane, though, the fact that she had asked for this spoke volumes.

"Hikari," Amane whispered, reaching out with a soapy hand to pull her love into a gentle kiss. "I love you too, and nothing would make me happier."

"Thank you, Amane-sen… um." Hikari stopped short, actually giggled for a moment, then went on. "Thank you… Amane."

After a long, cozy silence, Hikari again cleared her throat and went on. "Um, there was something else I'd like to ask you, as well."

"Anything."

For a moment, shyness warred with something that looked like actual mischief on Hikari's lovely face. "Would you… like me to wash your back?"

Amane blinked at the younger girl several times, then smiled. Perhaps she'd jumped the gun when she said that *nothing* would make her happier…

"Ah, this was just what I needed," Miyuki sighed happily. "A hot spring, pleasant company, tasty sake and beautiful scenery."

"Um, yes, the land bridge is lovely," Tamao nodded.

Miyuki took another sip of sake and winked at the younger girl. "Who was talking about the land bridge?"

Shizuma raised her eyebrows at her old friend. Something had certainly changed, and for the life of her, she could not yet figure it out. It had to be more than mere alcohol that was making Miyuki the biggest flirt of the evening. Shizuma had decided early on that she would have to tone down her own natural flirtatiousness, for Nagisa's comfort if nothing else, but Miyuki had all but made it unnecessary: even Shizuma at her best could not have been as humorously inappropriate as this.

In fact, between Miyuki's barrage of questions about Astraea and Chikaru's answering of same, she'd scarcely gotten a word in thus far beyond initial greetings. This was fine, though, because it gave her a chance to take a page from Chikaru's book and observe the proceedings.

And, she thought as she took another sip of her own sake, Miyuki had been correct about the pleasant scenery. Nagisa, snuggled against her on her left, was somehow becoming more beautiful every time Shizuma saw her, and there was probably more to it than simply absence making the heart grow fonder. Even in the short time since their vacation in France, Nagisa looked that much more trim, healthy and even mature. The girlish cuteness, which would probably never leave her entirely, was nonetheless giving way to the beautiful young woman she was becoming.

Miyuki, on the other hand, was practically glowing, and looked better than she had since time out of mind. Shizuma had watched her grow thinner and more ill-appearing the closer they had come to the end of their schooling, no doubt with the threat of her impending nuptials looming closer and closer. She was still a little on the thin side, as she had always been, but beyond any change in her body was the simple fact that she looked *happy*, and her happiness made her more beautiful than ever.

The three girls sitting opposite them were a study in both complement and contrast. Tamao, like Nagisa, still had a petite cuteness to her that would probably be with her for life, Hazuki was the perfect balance of athletic and feminine (how on Earth could she have so little fat anywhere else on her body and still have… those?), and Chikaru… she was every inch a woman, curvy in exactly the right places, always holding herself in a manner that hinted at her incredible inner strength.

More than this, though, as uncomfortable as Hazuki and particularly Tamao appeared, the three of them were always touching in some way, whether it be something as simple as a held hand or as subtle as a gentle caress of a shoulder. Seeing the three of them together

was both incredibly comforting and (Shizuma had to admit) rather arousing. Not in a way that made her feel even a little guilty, either: she had often heard it said that there is no sight more beautiful than someone in love, and these three all but radiated their attachment to one another. If anything, seeing the three of them made her want to curtail this meeting of the… *minds*… and drag Nagisa back to their room for something far steamier.

She had to feel for Tamao, though. Here she was, naked in a hot spring alongside her first kiss, her first big crush, her first girlfriend, and… her first *second* girlfriend, none of whom were the same girl. Add in her former class president, whom she'd very much looked up to, and it was a wonder the poor girl's eyes hadn't fogged over by now.

One thing was certain: Shizuma could certainly get used to having all of them around. Perhaps, came a particularly naughty thought, she should just marry them all so that she could keep them in her life. Nagisa could be her actual wife, Tamao could be wife number one, Hazuki could be wife number two, Chikaru could be…

Miyuki, once again, was far more verbal with her observations. "So. Threesome?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hazuki asked, arching one eyebrow at the former Miator president.

"Seriously, what's the deal with the three of you, anyway?" Miyuki went on. "I still have eyes and ears in Astraea as well, you know. So is this for real?"

"It's very real, Miyuki-sama," Tamao said, edging even closer to Hazuki. "We've… made a commitment to one another."

"What about you, Chikaru?" Miyuki asked, giving her former counterpart a level gaze. "I always figured you were the only one hundred percent straight girl in the dorm. I mean, make no mistake, these two are enough eye candy to give even a straight girl diabetes,

but you're *Chikaru* . You've had dozens of girls in your bed and never kissed a single one of them. What changed?"

"I could ask the same question of you, Miyuki-sama," Chikaru replied, giving the other girl a bemused smile. "I don't think I've ever seen this side of you. I like it, mind you, but it's… different."

"Yes, Miyuki, what *has* changed?" Shizuma asked, at the same time making a mental note of how deftly Chikaru had deflected the question. "When I last saw you, you looked like someone heading for the gallows."

"Ah," Miyuki nodded expressively. "Therein lies the tale, my friends. But first, more sake. I'll probably need it."

Chikaru poured for her. "There you are, my dear. Now, do tell."

"And I will, but first I must insist that none of this goes beyond this onsen. If it gets back to me that any of you let this slip, regardless of how much I love you, I'll be forced to send my hellish minions to destroy you."

"You have hellish minions now?" Shizuma chuckled. "You really *have* moved up in the world."

Miyuki sipped from her shallow cup, then set it to one side, and her face took on a distant, distracted look. "As most of you are no doubt aware, I have been betrothed to my new husband since I was a child. I had no say in the matter. It was largely a business deal, come right down to it, and it was my duty to follow through at the completion of my studies at St. Miator."

Shizuma noted the use of *my new husband* . So she was still married, by the sound of things.

"As most of you are *also* no doubt aware, I have long considered myself a lesbian, so the joke was doubly on me. Not only betrothed to a man I did not know, but to a man I could never love while

remaining true to who I am. And… to my own shame, I prayed that I was wrong about myself. I hoped that my feelings were just those immature girl-crushes we're always told about, and that I'd grow out of them in time to love a man, just as God and nature intended." Her face took on a sarcastic expression as she said this, indicating exactly what she thought about God and nature.

"I'm so sorry," Chikaru whispered soothingly, reaching to gently stroke Miyuki's shoulder.

"Don't be," Miyuki replied with a sardonic smile. "You've heard all of this before, after all. And I think you were right about one thing in particular: maybe I was setting my sights on the unattainable because I was afraid to learn the truth about myself."

"Miyuki," Shizuma said in a surprised whisper. She knew, in a roundabout way, that Miyuki had previously made use of Chikaru's services as the unofficial Astraea therapist, but she had never given much thought to what they might have discussed.

Her old friend looked at her with a sad little smile. "You know very well that I had dreams," she went on, "but as long as those dreams were hinged on something so far above me, I was safe. I could go on believing that I'd grow out of them, the way I knew I had to. If I'd ever truly fallen in love, and been loved in return… I don't know what I would have done."

At this point, with both Shizuma and Chikaru moving as though to hug her, Miyuki waved them off idly. "But that's not the good part of the story. I'm still getting to that."

"Just so it *has* a good part," Chikaru smiled in reply.

"Oh, most assuredly, Chikaru-chan. Now, where was I?"

"Hopeless," Chikaru supplied helpfully.

"Yes, thank you. So I marched down the aisle in a dress that cost more than my last two years at Miator, said my vows like a good girl, danced stiffly with my husband and sleepwalked my way through the reception, then went to the best honeymoon suite in Kyoto for the newlyweds' first night of wedded bliss and passion. And it was there… that something incredible happened." She smiled slyly at Shizuma, then looked over the rest of the group.

"You… discovered that you're attracted to men after all?" Hazuki ventured.

"Better," Miyuki grinned.

Shizuma looked from a smiling Miyuki to a confused Nagisa, and lastly to Chikaru, who looked very much like she was on the verge of piecing it together, but could not find the last bit. "For heaven's sake, Miyuki, what was it?" Shizuma asked.

"My husband took me by the hands, walked me to the marriage bed and sat me down. He then sat beside me and, with great difficulty, told me that he had something very important to say. Something he could not, in good conscience, keep to himself."

Miyuki again looked around the circle, seeming to enjoy the suspense of her own tale. At this point, a slow smile brightened Chikaru's face as she figured it out. "You're kidding."

"Not at all," Miyuki nodded, her grin deepening further.

"Well, tell the rest of us, then," Shizuma insisted.

"My husband," Miyuki said slowly, "the man to whom I've been engaged as long as I can remember, whose presence in my life I've been dreading for almost as long… is homosexual."

This news was met with stunned silence from all except for Chikaru, who eventually began to laugh. "Layers upon *layers*," she giggled. "Oh, Miyuki, what happened then?"

"I stared at him for a few moments, then started to laugh. And then I couldn't stop. I was absolutely in hysterics, and I think I frightened the poor man to death, but then when I finally had my voice back, I looked him in the eye, smiled, and said 'What a coincidence.'"

"But - but what does that mean, Miyuki-sama?" Nagisa asked. "Are you still married? Will it be annulled?"

Miyuki chuckled. "Yes, I'm still married, Nagisa-chan, I daresay even *happily* married, and no, there are no plans to change that fact."

"Happily married?" Shizuma repeated.

"We stayed up all night talking," Miyuki elaborated, "and I learned that his situation was almost identical to mine. He'd been terrified that he would dishonor me or offend me, and it was as much a relief to him as it was to me. And so, rather than the dutiful night of heir-making that I'd expected, we spent our time getting to know one another at last, and all along I felt the weight of the world leaving my shoulders. We went on our honeymoon to Europe, and with those expectations gone, we were truly free to enjoy one another's company. I've made a very dear friend in that man. And in the process, we both came to the agreement that we will not hold one another back from being what we are. After all, he's a man, and he should be expected to spend time with his close male friends, and no one will look twice if there is, say, a live-in maid to help me with the children, don't you agree?"

"But… children?" Tamao asked. "Are you still going to…"

"To be honest, Tamao-chan, motherhood was the only part of my fate that I was looking forward to," Miyuki explained. "I would see to it that they were not raised as I was, and I would do everything in my power to ensure that they would have the chance to make their own decisions in life. Happily, I think my husband will more than agree with my intention to raise them in this way."

Tamao frowned. "Yes, but… how do you intend to… you know, *have* children?"

"Science is an amazing thing, my dear," Miyuki winked, then rolled her eyes. "When the time is right, after our *countless* hours of lovemaking fail to produce an heir, I imagine we shall resort to other methods of fertilization. But we're going to wait a little while, at least, and enjoy ourselves. This weekend he's skiing with one of his groomsmen, and I'm free to sit in an onsen with five absolutely delectable young ladies." Here, her expression became a comical frown. "All of whom are spoken for, damn you all, but at least you're easy on the eyes."

"I'm so happy for you, Miyuki-sama," Nagisa smiled shyly. "I always felt so terribly for… well, for…"

"For stealing the love of my life?" Miyuki replied, arching both eyebrows at the younger girl.

Shizuma rounded on Miyuki and was on the verge of saying something defensive (as, apparently, was Tamao), but Miyuki held up one hand and grimaced. "I'm sorry, that was supposed to be a joke, but it was in terrible taste, wasn't it?"

"A bit," Shizuma nodded.

"I apologize, truly," Miyuki sighed. "There's still a shadow of the old bitter Miyuki left, though I've been trying to rein her in. Honestly, Nagisa-chan, as jealous as I may have been of you from time to time, you brought my best friend in all the world back to us, and I've always been grateful for that. I don't begrudge you for a moment. I only hope you don't do what I did."

"Mope and wait for your doom?" Shizuma replied, deciding to share the wealth, as it were.

"Touché," Miyuki smirked, but then her face darkened. "No, what I mean is, don't waste this. I went to my marriage bed thinking that I'd

never have the chance to truly love someone, because I'd staggered through my life trying to avoid my feelings. Don't you dare waste a moment of this, you two… and that goes for the three of you as well. Whatever the hell it is you have, don't waste it."

Shizuma felt Nagisa's arms slip around her waist, and she pulled her beloved even closer. Across from them, Tamao put her head on Hazuki's shoulder, and Chikaru reached across the middle girl to squeeze Tamao's hand. Miyuki smiled at them all, then took another sip of sake, and Shizuma found herself smiling as well. Not a moment had yet been wasted this weekend, certainly, and she had no intention of letting even one slip past.

Momomi was having one of her customary evening showers when Kaname arrived at their room (the joke had always been that she needed to scrub away the daily blood of her enemies), but Kaname was in no mood to wait for her to finish.

Without a moment's pause, she grasped the edge of the shower curtain and pulled it open. Momomi let out a tiny shriek and moved to cover herself, but then scowled and lowered her hands. "What do you want?" she growled, turning to face Kaname directly, her stance defiant, her eyes all but daring her former lover to look at what she could no longer have.

"Can this be over now?" Kaname asked, quietly.

For an instant, Kaname thought she saw a flash of fear in those eyes, but then Momomi's scowl deepened. "I thought it already *was* over." She shut off the water, then barged past the taller girl to grab her towel and head back into the main room.

"I don't mean that," Kaname sighed. "I mean… *this* . Can we just fast-forward past the obligatory angry period and try to work this out?"

"You're the one who cheated on me," Momomi reminded her. "What was her name, anyway?"

"What?"

"Her *name!* What was her name?"

"Lilith," Kaname said after a pause. "Her name was Lilith."

"What kind of stupid name is Lilith? Jesus, did you cheat on me with an *American?* "

"Momomi, I'm not going to try to make excuses for what I did, but there were reasons. I'd just been through something that tore me apart inside, and I wasn't thinking clearly… or at least, I wasn't thinking like myself." Not that this had been a bad thing, really…

"Was it some tourist, then?" Momomi went on, seemingly ignoring what Kaname had just said. "Just a nice little Welcome To Japan f**k with no strings attached?"

"We've gotten through worse than this," Kaname said in a hard voice.

"But you *cheated* on me!" Momomi screamed back at her, holding onto these words like a life-raft. "This wasn't just one of your sick obsessions with Minamoto and Ohtori and Azuma, either. You *cheated!* "

Kaname gazed levelly at the other girl "Do we really want to go this way? How many times did you cheat on me, Momomi? And don't lie: I have names."

Momomi shifted uncomfortably, but her eyes remained defiant.

"We made it past all of those," Kaname reminded her. "All I'm asking is that we try to make it past this."

Conversation had been soft and sparse after the conclusion of Miyuki's story, with all of those present seemingly lost in their own thoughts.

This was, in some ways, more uncomfortable than the conversation had been, at least for Hazuki, because it left her mind wide open to her surroundings. She honestly could not think of a time when she had been surrounded by this much beauty. Like the shower she had described earlier to Tamao, there seemed to be a good amount of staring going on, but there was a difference this time, as most of the contact seemed to be eye to eye. Several times she found herself watching either Nagisa or Shizuma (who were somewhere between cuddling and petting), only to have the other girl look over, lock eyes with her, and smile in acknowledgment. Shizuma even winked at her once, as if to say she didn't mind. This trip *had* been her idea, after all.

Closing her eyes was little better, though, as this merely intensified other senses, making her acutely aware of everywhere that she, Tamao and Chikaru were touching one another. More than that, her *Souma* was going crazy, its motions far more intense and erratic than during their meditations or even their nighttime cuddles. The transfer of energy between them had always been a skin-to-skin thing, and right now there was a lot of skin touching and being touched.

To put it bluntly, Hazuki was finding herself hornier than a herd of antelope.

Just as she was trying to think of a way to dismiss herself, though (and drag the others off with her), Miyuki opened one eye and stared at the engaged couple. "Nagisa-chan, remember what I said earlier about not wasting time?"

Nagisa's hand, which had been idly stroking Shizuma along the collarbones, stopped short. "Miyuki-sama?" she asked.

"For heaven's sake, girl, we're all family here. Either touch your fiancée's boobs or so help me, I'll come over there and do it for you."

"Miyuki!" Shizuma exclaimed, caught between amusement and annoyance.

With a dramatic sigh, Miyuki stood up, put her hands on her hips, and faced the rest of them down. "All right, as the former president of St. Miator, I'm going to fall back on old habits and call this meeting adjourned." She then pointed at Shizuma and Nagisa. "You two, go back to your room and have sex." She then brought the finger around to Hazuki. "You three, go back to your room… figure out who's going to do what to whom, and… well, *do* it. I, my dear friends, will go back to *my* room and have very, *very* happy dreams. And with that, I bid you good evening."

Not nearly as unsteadily as might be expected given the amount of sake she'd been drinking, Miyuki hoisted herself out of the onsen, wrapped her towel around herself, and was off to her section of the rented suite, leaving the remaining couple and trio to themselves.

"Is she… okay?" Nagisa asked at length.

"More than I've ever seen her," Shizuma smiled after her friend. She then turned back to Nagisa and gave her a small kiss that Hazuki could have sworn made the world go green behind her eyes again. "Shall we be off as well, then?"

Nagisa looked from one of them to the other, her eyes eventually resting on Tamao. "I'm… glad we were all able to get together like this. See you at breakfast, then?"

"I'll be there with bells on," Chikaru smiled. "And clothes on, for that matter."

"How novel," Shizuma smirked. "Good night, my dears."

And then they, in turn, slipped out of the warm water, wrapped themselves, and walked hand in hand to their own door.

Hazuki was about to suggest that they follow suit with all haste, but Chikaru was already moving away from the side of the sunken spring and turning to face them. "I'm… going to see if I can't prevail upon Miyuki to let me stay with her tonight. Not like *that*, of course, but…"

"Chikaru," Hazuki started, but Chikaru shook her head and smiled.

"Do you think I can't feel it?" she asked gently. "Do you think I don't know what the two of you have in mind? I'm sorry, my loves, but… I'm still not there."

"But Chikaru, we don't have to…" Tamao tried to interject, but Chikaru brought one finger to the girl's lips to shush her.

"As I said before, *never* delay a pleasurable activity while waiting for me. And as Miyuki said… don't waste a moment, my loves.

She held out her arms, and they shared a three-way embrace that would surely have made Hazuki's legs give out had she been standing. *Souma* of every kind raced through her, making her feel as though every nerve ending was aflame, and she was almost painfully aware of every tiny motion of damp skin sliding against damp skin.

But then Chikaru broke away from them, and the fires retreated to a dull roar. Hazuki watched her as she slipped out of the onsen, her eyes taking in every detail as the water cascaded from her, leaving her glistening softly in the lamplight.

"Chikaru," Tamao called softly.

"Hmm? Chikaru smiled, turning back to them as she retrieved her towel.

"You're beautiful," Tamao whispered, her tone nothing short of reverent.

"Thank you, sweet Tamao. As are you."

Once she was gone, Hazuki turned to Tamao. "Tamao-chan?"

Tamao fixed dazed eyes upon her. "That was…"

"Yeah, that was…"

Rather than complete the thought, they fell together into a silent, passionate kiss, which said far more at that moment than any words could have done.

Finally being able to let her hair down again was not unlike letting out a long-held breath, Shizuma decided. She regarded her reflection with no small amount of humor, though, as her silver locks refused to go "down" as such, choosing instead to spread more or less to either side until they looked rather like a thundercloud. There was a long brushing in her near future, but that was going to have to wait. There were more pressing concerns for the remainder of the evening.

And then, just as the word "pressing" went through her mind, she both saw and felt Nagisa's arms encircle her from behind, followed by the welcome, uniquely perfect feeling of her lover's lithe body pressing against her. "Shizuma-sama is very beautiful," came the younger girl's soft voice.

Something in the tone of her voice, not to mention her unexpected formality, immediately caught Shizuma's concern, and she turned in Nagisa's arms. "What is it, my love?"

"Nothing really, just… me being silly."

Shizuma took Nagisa's face in her hands. "You're not nearly as silly as you think you are, sweetheart. Now, what's on your mind?"

Nagisa took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh. "Miyuki-sama is very beautiful."

"More so now that she's happy, yes."

"And she cares very deeply for you."

"And I for her. Nagisa, what's this all about? If there's even a whisper of a concern that I'm going to leave you for her now that she's free… please, put it out of your mind. I'm yours now, and nothing will change that."

Nagisa nodded slowly, but then looked away, unable to meet her fiancée's eyes. "Would it make Shizuma-sama happy if we… tried to…"

"Tried to what, Nagisa?"

"Tried to…" Nagisa swallowed hard and went on. "Tried to… share? Like Tamao-chan is doing?"

Shizuma flashed back guiltily on her whimsical thought of numbering her wives, and wondered for a moment if Nagisa had somehow picked up on that. Given the nature of the three girls sitting opposite them, that might have been possible, after all. "No, my sweet," she whispered, pulling Nagisa even closer. "I may joke about it, I may tease, I may even try to get us all into a hot spring together, but… why would I want any more than what I have?"

To her relief, Nagisa smiled up at her. "Really?"

"Without a doubt," Shizuma assured her, pulling her into a kiss.

"Well?" Kaname asked quietly.

"What do you *want* from me?" Momomi shot back at her.

Kaname took a measured breath. "How about we start with what I *don't* want? I don't want a by-the-numbers trip through your erogenous zones. I don't want to get you off in seven minutes or less

- *which we both know I can do* - and then roll over and go to sleep. I don't want a quick f**k."

She took a step closer, and while Momomi's eyes widened, she did not budge. "I also don't want there to be any talk of ropes, scarves, cuffs or anything else of the sort. I don't want to play into any of your rape fantasies. I don't want to dominate or be dominated. I don't want this to be a game. I don't want to *make* you want it, because that means you didn't want it to begin with."

After a short pause, she took another even breath and went on, her eyes intent on the other girl. "As for what I *do* want? I want to learn your body again: your *entire* body, not just the highlights. I want to explore every last centimeter of you. I want to find every single place that makes you gasp, shudder, squirm and even laugh. And then I want to kiss, lick, fondle, pinch, nibble and tease those places, one after another. I want to *love* your body, and to *know* your body. I want to immerse myself in you. I want to spend hours upon days finding you again. The next time you say my name, I want to hear 'Oh, God' next to it. And then, if you would do me the honor, I want to share *myself* with *you* again as well. All of me, with none of the safe boundaries we used to play in. Every. Last. Bit. No safety net, and nothing held back."

"Kaname," Momomi whispered.

"None of this means anything, though, if you don't want the same," Kaname replied in a husky voice as she inched still closer. "And honestly? I think you do."

Momomi bit her lower lip, and for a moment it looked like she might launch herself into her ex-lover's arms, but she then turned away and closed her eyes. "Tomorrow. Ask me tomorrow."

"Why? What does tomorrow have to do with anything?"

"Because you don't even sound like yourself right now!" Momomi shouted, looking back at the taller girl with tears in her eyes. "I don't

know what's gotten into you tonight, but I need to know that this isn't just drunk, horny Kaname saying whatever she has to! How do I know that all this talk about no games isn't just a game itself? If you really mean any of what you just said, then say it again tomorrow after you've had a chance to cool off!"

Kaname felt something crumple inside herself, and she took a step back. "Momomi," she sighed.

"Just… tomorrow," Momomi quavered, and now she looked deeply unsettled and even frightened. "I can't deal with this right now. Please, Kaname. Tomorrow."

The ensuing silence was, to kill the cliché, positively deafening. At last, though, Kaname nodded, turned stiffly, and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Momomi asked.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," Kaname replied, not looking back. "Right now, though, I don't think either one of us wants me to be here." She pulled the door open, stepped through, and quietly latched it behind her.

Only then did she feel her eyes begin to mist over, but she quickly forced that back. Now was not the time: she would be damned if she let herself cry over this. In a way, she couldn't blame Momomi for having her doubts: after all their head-games and shifts of power, why should she take Kaname seriously now? Why should she expect this to be real? What example had she ever been given, really?

Kaname briefly rubbed both hands over her face, then through her hair, and let out a deep sigh. Now she needed to find a place to spend the night. Perhaps Chikaru's room? It was a commonly known fact that Chikaru never locked her door, even when she was off campus. She could always apologize later if need be.

As she started down the hall toward the staircase, however, she heard a door creak open just ahead of her. She pulled up short, not really wanting to be seen in her current condition, but after several moments, no one emerged.

Was that… Hazuki's door? But Hazuki wasn't even here: she was in Miyazu, no doubt getting all sweaty and disheveled with her threesome.

Cautiously, Kaname approached the door and pushed it the rest of the way open. It was unoccupied, but the lights were on, and to Kaname's surprise, there was a small tea table set up, with a very un-Hazuki-like china teapot and cup, each giving off fragrant steam. Next to the cup rested a small silver flask. Hazuki's bed, which (the few times Kaname had seen it) tended to be neatly, even obsessively tidy, had the covers pulled back as though waiting for someone to lie down in it.

"Hello?" she called softly. There was no reply, so she closed the door behind her and knelt at the tea table.

A pair of small notes were attached to the teapot and the flask. Kaname peered closely at the unfamiliar handwriting on the former.

Dear Kaname-chan: This particular mix of tea won't be invented on your world for a good forty years, but you looked like you could use it. XOXO

Smiling now, Kaname picked up the flask, opened the screw-top, and took a sniff that ended up roaring through her sinuses and making her eyes water. Whatever this was, it was stronger than any sake she'd ever tried.

The note attached read: *This, on the other hand, is something very old fashioned, in the event that tea is simply not enough. XOXOXO*

They returned to their room with nothing more than two fluffy white towels separating them, and those didn't last for long.

Sitting between Tamao and Chikaru in the onsen had indeed been both torturous and deeply arousing for Hazuki, and based on the way Tamao was kissing her, she had not been alone in that. Kissing had always been something gentle and sweet between them, with only hints at the hunger that lay beneath the surface. Now, there was little more than an aching need as they fell into bed together, Tamao landing more or less on top of Hazuki.

With surprising strength, Tamao grasped both of Hazuki's hands and pinned her to the mattress. She then pushed herself up and stared wide-eyed at the other girl, and her unbound hair spilled over Hazuki's neck and shoulders. "I love you," she said in a tremulous whisper, the quaver in her voice at odds with her forceful actions.

"I love you," Hazuki echoed, her own voice coming in a soft growl. Tamao again leaned in to kiss her, and Hazuki wrapped both arms around her beautiful poet's back and rolled to her left, so the two were now lying side by side, with a barely perceptible shimmer of tiny green sparks running over their bare skin.

Hazuki had long dreamed of sharing this moment with Hatsumi, of course, and for the briefest moment she allowed herself a pang of regret that it had never happened. But it truly *was* only the briefest of moments, because the reality now in her arms was worth every endless day of that unrequited fantasy. A second, more pronounced feeling of dismay came from the knowledge that Chikaru was not here to share this with them. How long was their beloved friend going to separate herself from the two of them as she had tonight? Would Chikaru ever be able to feel this incredible rush of emotions for herself?

For another brief moment, Hazuki wondered if they should stop after all, and hold back, as Tamao had suggested, until the third of their circle was ready. But Chikaru had wanted this for them all along, hadn't she? And even though it was selfish of her, Hazuki wanted

this as well. Perhaps, she thought with a smile, she and Tamao could learn a few things along the way that would shock the daylights out of their resident healer once she *did* feel ready. And what a pleasure those lessons would be…

Except now, with their bodies pressed close and their *Souma* thrumming from every point where they touched, with Tamao gasping for breath and whispering her name again and again, Hazuki realized that she had no idea what to do next.

Unbidden, a memory flashed through her senses, of another darkened room, and another shapely form lying beside her, this one with half-lidded violet eyes, pale blue hair, a mischievous smile, and a gently mocking voice. " *And when you finally catch up with this one love, the one you've been dreaming about and saving yourself for… Tell me, Hazuki, what do you intend to do with her? What comes… naturally, perhaps?"*

Maybe things wouldn't come naturally after all, but she would be damned if she didn't try. "Turn over, Tamao-chan," she whispered.

"Um, over?"

"Lie on your other side."

Tamao looked confused at the request, but complied. The brief separation was like a shock of cold water, but then Hazuki scooted herself to lie behind the smaller girl, and the *Souma* again sparked as she pressed herself as closely as she could to Tamao's back. Hazuki rested her chin over Tamao's shoulder so that they lay cheek-to-cheek, then reached one hand around and began tracing her fingertips up and down the soft curves of her lover's bare skin. Tamao inhaled sharply, and as she did, Hazuki could almost feel her reaction through the joined *Souma* .

"Forgive me, Tamao-chan," she whispered. "This is all… new to me, too. I'd like to try something, though, if you'll let me."

"Anything," Tamao gasped in reply, flashing a brief, brilliant smile before again closing her eyes to these new sensations.

Hazuki continued slowly and gently gliding her fingertips over Tamao's soft skin as though trying to commit it all to memory. As familiar as the topography was, she knew that she had a lot to learn.

Oh, wonderful, she thought to herself, *I'm naked in bed with Tamao, and I'm thinking of words like topography?*

"Hazuki-chan?" Tamao asked suddenly.

"Hmm?"

"You, um… you giggled."

"Sorry, Tamao-chan," Hazuki grinned, and just like that, the tension was broken. No, things wouldn't come naturally, and no, things wouldn't be perfect.

But they had plenty of time to work toward that.

Closing her eyes now, Hazuki let her fingers drift lower. It was true enough that she had no real experience with loving another woman's body, but she'd had plenty of practice on her own, and even as Tamao again drew a sharp breath though clenched teeth, Hazuki reasoned that this would be as good a place to start as any.

Miyuki's room, as it turned out, had as good a view of *Amanohashidate* as the onsen itself, so Chikaru sat quietly at the windows, gazing out into the night as she tried to quiet her mind, which was currently awash with thoughts both her own and… not.

After a long while, Miyuki, dressed in one of the kimonos supplied by the resort, sat beside her former Lulim counterpart on the sofa. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked softly.

"You can go back to sleep," Chikaru smiled. "I don't sleep much anymore, myself, but please, don't let me keep you awake."

"And a fine friend I'd be if I did," Miyuki snorted. "Do you want to talk about it? It seems obvious enough that the three of you aren't fighting, so… is this relationship not what the rumors say it is?"

"You know as well as I do that none of us can ever live up to the rumors," Chikaru reminded her. "Still, Tamao-chan spoke the truth. We've made a commitment, and I have every intention of spending the rest of my life with the two of them, for as long as they'll have me."

"None of which explains why you're sitting here with me in the Not-Getting-Any suite."

Chikaru smiled at these words. "I'm so glad to see this side of you, Miyuki. I feel like I'm finally getting to meet a part of you that you never let out while we were both still in school."

"Thank you," Miyuki nodded, "but you're changing the subject again, and I don't intend to let you this time."

"No, I suppose you don't," Chikaru sighed. "It's… complicated. There are some things I'm not… ready for."

"I see. Now, is this normal, run-of-the-mill Sex Is Scary apprehension, or are you being like me, and trying to convince yourself that you're something you're not?"

Chikaru looked away, returning her gaze to the distant lights of Miyazu. "That's just it, Miyuki," she said, her voice suddenly constricted. "I… still don't really know *what* I am…"

"I can tell you one thing you are," Miyuki said quietly, slipping one arm across the other girl's shoulders.

"What's that?"

"You're… crying."

Now that there was no denying it, the tears came freely, and Chikaru collapsed against Miyuki's shoulder and let herself be held. "You poor thing," Miyuki sighed. "We're quite the pair, you and I. I'm married to a friend and still looking for what I want, and you're married to two friends and still looking for what you are."

"Sums it up nicely," Chikaru laughed through the tears. "Thank you, Miyuki."

"How many times did you let me cry on *your* shoulder, Chikaru-chan?"

"I never kept count. It's… just what I do."

Miyuki stroked her hair and held her tighter. "Then tonight it's what *I* do," she whispered gently.

Next: Tomorrow

Tomorrow

I'm waiting to restore my love

I'm waiting to restore my faith

I'll wait for you until I know

There's a heartache for everyone

-Indigo Girls

.

But I don't hate you, or want you

Enough to wake you

So if you freeze tomorrow, come back lucky

We said as your eyes were closing

-Ladytron

Part 5: Tomorrow

Momomi was up early. That is to say, she had given up on going back to sleep by this time, and was spending her early Sunday morning doing useful things like pacing fretfully along the short length of her dormitory room, wondering whether Kaname would be coming back soon, and more importantly, whether she wanted to be here when it happened.

Kaname had *never* looked at her like that. Not when they had first become friends, not when they had first become *more than* friends,

and certainly not since any of their subsequent breakups and reconciliations. Not with eyes wide enough to drown in, staring at her with such intensity and focus that it took Momomi's breath away to find herself the recipient of that gaze.

Not with such complete *sincerity* .

Still, Momomi found it impossible to believe that it could be as simple as this. What was she playing at? What was her angle? There had to be more to it, didn't there?

In the end, she found herself too nervous to stick around and find out, so she got dressed and headed downstairs. The gates would be open by this hour, so she probably had some time to go to her office at St. Spica before Mass and catch up on some of the paperwork she'd been avoiding. While she was thinking about it, she dropped by the mail room and checked her postbox. She'd neglected to pick up any of her mail for a few days, so booklets and envelopes practically poured out onto her upon unlocking it. She gathered it into a manageable pile, stuffed it under one arm, and strode purposefully out of the dormitory and across campus to the main building of St. Spica.

Only after she closed and locked the door of the council office behind her did she let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding. She was safe. Kaname couldn't follow her here: not anymore.

Sighing heavily as she sat down at her desk, Momomi flipped through the pile of mail she'd been carrying. Catalogs and magazines, mostly, along with a reminder card that she was due for her next manicure, an offer from a hot spring resort down the coast, and… a letter from her mother?

That was certainly odd. Momomi furrowed her brow as she studied the envelope: the stationery looked like something she'd use, certainly, and there was no mistaking the elegant penmanship. But what on Earth would her mother be writing to her about?

Congratulations on her promotion didn't seem likely. Her allowance was transferred electronically through the bank, so it certainly wouldn't be money. The idea that it could be simple motherly conversation was positively laughable.

Curious now, Momomi set the rest of the stack aside, pulled a silver letter opener from her top desk drawer and slit the envelope open along the lengthier edge. It contained a single piece of folded stationery, which Momomi unfolded and read.

It took her approximately thirty seconds to scan the contents of the letter, and in those thirty seconds Momomi felt her entire world come to an end.

Hazuki awoke, largely because her *Souma* wasn't giving her much choice in the matter.

For a moment, she found herself rather disoriented as her inner senses sought to reconcile themselves with sight, smell, hearing and touch. (And taste… certainly taste.) This was more difficult than normal, though: even though she spent nearly every night sleeping in contact with the *Souma* of her dear ones, this time she felt almost detached from her own shell, as though she had let her whole self flow along with the exchange of energy. It was almost an effort to pull herself back, and for a moment she wondered whether she should bother just yet, or instead stay in this warm place that belonged to neither and yet both of them at the same time. Eventually, though, she slowly opened her eyes.

She and Tamao were still very pleasantly entangled under a single thin sheet, and Hazuki smiled both in fondness for the girl in her arms and in memory of the evening's antics. Their energy was still humming from every place where skin was touching skin (and there were a lot of those), and Hazuki had to wonder how they had managed to fall asleep in the first place with all that inner noise.

Her first time had not been everything she'd imagined, certainly. The skies had not parted, the earth had not trembled, and she had not heard choirs of angels. She and Tamao had not known via any transcendent intuition where to put their hands, or their lips, or any other parts, really. It *had* felt like they had touched one another's souls, but honestly, they did that every day now. All in all, it had been trial and error, with a not insignificant amount of error.

But it had been wonderful anyway.

Somewhere, Hazuki knew, Chou'un would be laughing at her inexperience and saying "I warned you, didn't I?" She chuckled to herself at the image, and at that moment, Tamao's eyes opened as well. "Good morning," Hazuki whispered, kissing the other girl on the tip of the nose.

"So it is," Tamao smiled as she managed to stretch languidly without ever leaving Hazuki's arms. "What made you laugh just now?"

"Um, nothing," Hazuki blushed.

"Come on, tell me," Tamao giggled. "Was I drooling? Is there something in my teeth?"

"No, nothing like that," Hazuki laughed with her. "Actually, I was just wondering what Chou'un would say if she could see me now."

"Ah," Tamao nodded against her. "Hazuki-chan, I know we're both new to this, but I'm reasonably certain ex-girlfriends are *not* a suitable topic of conversation for the morning after."

Hazuki was about to protest the use of the term ex-girlfriend, but then Tamao winked, making it clear she had only been teasing. "And anyway," the young Miatoran continued, "if half the things you've told me about her are true, she'd probably be giving us a step-by-step review of our technique. Possibly with diagrams."

"That's kind of what I was thinking," Hazuki agreed. "Not to mention offering pointers, and even demonstrations. All for our own sake, of course."

"Of course."

"But since she's not here, I guess we'll just have to figure it out for ourselves, won't we?"

"Oh, dread," Tamao grinned. "However will we manage?"

For several long moments after opening her eyes, Kaname wondered what the hell that sword was doing hanging on the wall beside her bed. Then, somewhat blearily, she remembered that this was not her bed at all: both it and the sword were Hazuki's. She slowly sat up, then immediately thought better of it and collapsed back against the mattress.

Whatever had been in that flask, it hadn't been sake.

She felt a momentary stab of panic: had Lilith gotten her drunk and had her way with her? Kaname did a quick self-inventory and realized that she was still fully dressed, so probably not. And anyway, if Lilith had wanted to have her way with Kaname she probably wouldn't have resorted to alcohol.

Kaname rolled onto her back and let out a long sigh. Lilith was a goddess, or an angel, or something similarly powerful: she could probably just wave her hand and turn Kaname into her sex slave, but as yet, she had not done so. A dark part of Kaname wished that she would, just to make things easier. Maybe it would be better not to have a choice in the matter. She probably deserved to be the helpless one after everything she'd done…

Except she wasn't that person. Not anymore. She was trying to atone for her misdeeds, starting with Momomi.

Even as she thought of her longtime lover, though, a simple question came to the forefront of her mind with shocking clarity: was it worth it? Was there anything there worth saving? Was it too late, and if so, was that such a bad thing? Even leaving Lilith out of the picture for a moment, would continuing her relationship with Momomi be healthy for either one of them?

At that moment, she found her train of thought derailed as a very welcome scent tickled her nostrils. Was that coffee?

She tried for a second time to sit up, and this time made it. A scan of the room revealed that the tea table had vanished, but sitting upon Hazuki's desk were a glass of water and a steaming mug, with another note tucked in between them. Kaname gingerly got to her feet and staggered to the desk like a zombie in search of fresh brains.

After one sip from the mug, Kaname was convinced that this was the best coffee she had ever tasted, hangover notwithstanding. Already feeling as though her mind were clearing, she picked up the note and peered closely at the increasingly familiar writing.

Dear Kaname-chan: You may find this hard to believe, but I'm pulling for you and what's-her-name. Do what needs doing. XOXOXO

Miyuki regarded her reflection in the bathroom mirror for a few moments. One advantage to the short hair, she had to admit, was that it was practically dry already, just minutes after finishing her shower. She ran her fingers over the two creases between her eyebrows, trying to smooth them out. Nineteen years old, and she already had worry lines; small wonder, given the way she'd glared her way through her teenage years.

Upon entering the bedroom, she was not at all surprised to find that Chikaru was still staring out past the land bridge, her own hair hanging damp around her shoulders from her earlier shower. "You're

not dressed," she said to the younger girl, noting that she was still clad only in one of the resort's kimonos.

"All my clothes are in my bag," Chikaru smiled ruefully. "I didn't think to grab it before I came here last night."

Miyuki paused for a moment before unfastening her towel, then remembered the way the six of them had spent the previous evening and decided that modesty could wait a little longer for its return. "Ah, well. Nothing wrong with breakfast in a kimono anyway. We can let the others wonder when they see us matching."

"Indeed," Chikaru agreed, her eyes never leaving the distant ocean.

"What are you afraid of, Chikaru?" Miyuki asked, deciding not to dance around the issue any further. "Do you really think that now that the two of them have had a taste of one another, they won't have anything left for you anymore? That's not what it looked like to me last night."

"It's not that," Chikaru sighed, looking back at her temporary roommate. She blinked a couple of times at Miyuki's state of undress, then turned back to the window. "Okay, maybe it *is* that, a little. Helping people mend their hearts and then backing away is an old, old habit, and it's hard not to feel like it's going to happen again, just because it always does. At the same time, I don't want to cling just for the sake of not falling into those old habits. They deserve to enjoy every moment, every first, and every new experience without worrying about me."

"Maybe they *want* to worry about you," Miyuki snorted as she pulled on her kimono. She then peered very closely at Chikaru as she said the next part. "I couldn't help noticing that three people in love glow considerably more than two."

The average observer probably wouldn't have noticed Chikaru's tiny flinch, but Miyuki had lived her life being anything but an average observer. "Now, I don't expect you to give me any details," she went

on, "but the three of you have something more than just affection for one another, don't you?"

"You could say that," Chikaru said carefully. "Miyuki…"

"No, don't say anything else," Miyuki insisted. "Not now, anyway. If I'm meant to know, I can know later, when you've got your own head straight. You may not remember this, but your sister and I were fairly close as well, so I'm not at all surprised if what I was seeing last night was more than just a sake buzz after all." After tying up the sash of her kimono, she crossed the room and placed her hands on Chikaru's shoulders.

"How much… did you see?"

"Enough to make me a believer," Miyuki chuckled. "Maybe making something like this work seems like an impossibility, but after my husband's confession, I suppose you could say that my belief in the impossible has been renewed. You have all my hopes, Chikaru-chan."

"Thank you," Chikaru whispered.

They stood in companionable silence for a while, then Miyuki brushed Chikaru's hair to one side and planted a loud kiss on the nape of her neck. "There. Now that we've had our illicit affair, let's go out and meet the others, eh?"

Chikaru took one of Miyuki's hands and gave it a squeeze. "No better time than the present."

They entered the central courtyard to find that a ridiculously large breakfast had been set by the staff, and their four companions were already up and partaking. And all four of them, Miyuki noted to her amusement, were still in their morning kimonos as well. "No, don't wait up for us," she said in a long-suffering voice. "We'll just eat the scraps."

"Chikaru," Tamao beamed as she and Hazuki stood to greet their missing third. Miyuki held back and watched as Tamao approached Chikaru and, without a moment's hesitation, embraced her warmly and even a little fiercely. Hazuki quickly added herself to the hug, so that Chikaru was held snugly between them, where she belonged.

Somewhere in the background, Miyuki was sure she heard Shizuma sigh happily, while Nagisa made a sound that was dangerously close to a squee. Not that Miyuki could blame them, of course. She was definitely going to need to ask her Astraea contacts to keep her posted on how this story progressed. In the meantime, though, it was nice to just enjoy the glow.

To a point. "Okay, break it up," she sighed. "You're all delicious, but let's keep it to the food on the table, shall we?"

Looking through crowds hadn't been a problem for Kaname for some time, thanks to her height, but even a few extra centimeters wasn't helping her pick out that elusive head of brown hair in the post-Mass throng. Momomi was, by her own admission, anything but a proper little Catholic schoolgirl, but she seldom missed Mass, and given her new role as class president, she couldn't exactly afford to be ditching.

At length, she spotted the younger Etoile in a small conversational cluster with Yaya and Tsubomi, so after taking yet another steadying breath, she approached them. "Pardon me, Etoile-sama?"

Three pairs of eyes looked up at her, and two of these immediately narrowed with hostility while Tsubomi made a not-so-subtle move to place herself between Yaya and the intruder. More fences to be mended.

Hikari, thankfully, gave her a small, almost welcoming smile. "Good morning, Kenjō-san. What can I do for you?"

"I was just wondering if you'd seen Momomi? She wasn't in our room when…" She stopped herself before she could say "when I got back," lest she add fresh fuel to the day's gossip. "She must have left early this morning, and I…"

Yaya muttered something that sounded a lot like "Can't imagine why she'd want to get away," but Kaname refused to take the bait.

"I'm afraid I haven't," Hikari frowned. "The Sisters were wondering where she was as well, though. Minamoto-san had permission to be away, but it sounded like Kiyashiki-san was expected to be there."

"I see," Kaname nodded. Chikaru, being Chikaru, had no doubt asked for and verified fifteen different kinds of permission before leaving for the weekend. Momomi was not exactly known for that level of foresight. "Thank you, Etoile-sama."

"If I see her, shall I let her know you're looking for her?"

After a pause to consider this, Kaname shook her head, then bowed to the younger girl. "No, Etoile-sama, but thank you. I imagine I'll see her when I see her…"

The view from the late-afternoon train back to Astraea was nothing short of spectacular, with the low sun casting ever-changing patterns on the deep blue of Wakasa Bay. As they pulled into the Tangoyura station, Hazuki couldn't help but smile to herself: this set of memories was far and away more pleasant than the last time she'd traveled these tracks. Of course, that time she'd been carrying an unconscious Kaname and fending off occasional dragon attacks, so it didn't take much to make a happier scene.

Chikaru was leaning warmly against her, with one arm wrapped around her shoulders and the opposite hand surreptitiously placed under the hem of Hazuki's shirt to rest just over her navel. Hazuki had briefly wondered if they might get strange looks due to the relative intimacy, but at this point she didn't care; the energy passing

between them was all that mattered. It made her very happy that Chikaru still wanted to touch, particularly now that she knew just how important this contact was for her.

"Did you enjoy the trip?" Chikaru asked at length, her voice barely audible over the sounds of the train as it pulled out of Tangoyura.

"Very much so. A joy shared is a joy multiplied, remember?"

"True," Chikaru smiled distantly. "Aaaaand, last night?"

"During or after the onsen?"

"After, silly."

"Um, it was quite nice. If you want details, I'll provide them, but maybe not while we're on the train?"

A troubled look crossed Chikaru's brow, and she took a breath as though to speak, but then hesitated.

"You can say it," Hazuki assured her.

"I don't know if I should," Chikaru grimaced. "It's not really a fair question to ask you."

"Ask it anyway."

"Did… did you think of me? While you were… together, I mean?"

Hazuki pondered this. "Well, you're right, that's not really a fair question at all, because if I say yes, then you'll probably feel bad for not being there with us, but if I say no, you'll probably feel like you're being left out, and I don't want either one of those."

"I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan. This part is pretty new to me, too. I'm beginning to think that another reason I romantically neutered myself was so that I'd never have to deal with this kind of insecurity."

"Well, I'll tell you this, then," Hazuki smiled at her. "Last night was wonderful and strange and in its own way perfect, but I think you'll find Tamao and me in agreement that there's plenty of room for it to become even more wonderful and strange and perfect." She kissed Chikaru's dark hair. "So relax, and content yourself with the knowledge that when you're ready, there are two women who are going to ravish the living daylights out of you, and anything that happens between now and then can be considered the best kind of practice."

"And if I'm never ready?"

"Then we'll continue enjoying the practice, and we'll still never let a day go by that we aren't inside you." Hazuki focused a wave of *Souma* through their connection to emphasize her point, and Chikaru smiled and snuggled closer.

"What do you think they're talking about?" the Lulim president asked after a pause.

Hazuki looked across the compartment to where Tamao and Nagisa were sitting on the opposite bench, huddled conspiratorially close and whispering. Every once in a while one of the two would giggle, or look across at the other girls. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well, it looks to me like they're comparing notes. Trust me; I've been on that hill for years, and I've seen that look before."

"Wonderful," Hazuki snorted. "Nagisa's going to get to hear all about my amateurish technique."

"I thought you said it was wonderful?"

"Yeah, but I didn't say *I* was."

Even as Chikaru giggled against her, Hazuki had a sobering thought. Sweet, cute little Nagisa probably knew more about sex than the other three combined, and almost certainly had far more practical

experience. Suddenly the idea of Tamao swapping stories with her was less vaguely uncomfortable than simply horrifying. And again, she knew, somewhere Chou'un would be laughing.

Maybe now that their first time had come and gone, it would be a good idea to get some advice after all.

By the time Momomi finally returned to her dorm room that night, Kaname was lying in bed with her eyes closed. Most of the lights were off, with the exception of Momomi's bedside lamp, which Kaname had apparently left on for her. Moving as quietly as she could (though she imagined her hammering heart could be heard throughout the building), she padded to her desk and put the hated envelope away. She then paused to lean against the hardwood of her desktop, with both palms flat against the cool, smooth surface. The tears were threatening to come back yet again, and she was running out of strength to fight them off.

She crossed the room to stand at Kaname's bedside, and for several long moments wondered what she should do. Which of her wants would she give in to?

"Where have you been?" Kaname asked quietly.

Momomi gasped as her roommate's eyes slowly opened and peered up at her with that same intensity that she'd felt the night before. Her next breath came in a shudder, but she closed her own eyes against the rising tears and clamped down on her emotions. She could not let Kaname see her like this. Not yet. Not until she knew.

"You didn't come to Mass, or any of the meals," Kaname went on, but her tone was more gentle than accusatory. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Momomi lied. "I've mostly been off-campus today."

"I'm sorry, Momomi," Kaname sighed. "I didn't mean to… scare you last night."

"Was I right, then?" Momomi shot back. "Were you just saying those things? Did you mean any of them at all?"

"I meant every word," Kaname replied in a low voice, and her eyes hardened. "No games, and no lies."

"You'll stay with me, then?" Momomi quavered. "No matter what?"

Kaname sat up in bed and faced her directly. "I'll be yours as long as you still want me," she whispered, reaching to tenderly cup Momomi's face with both hands.

For a moment, Momomi was too stunned to say anything more, as Kaname would never have said something like that before. Their relationship had always been a struggle for power, and for Kaname to so easily cede the position of strength was wholly unnatural. Something had changed after all, Momomi realized, and she was not sure how to react to the possibility that this might be something more real than she had ever experienced.

So she reacted as she always had, by seizing the opening she had been given. She took Kaname's hands in her own, and moved them from her face down to her breasts. Kaname had never been able to resist that.

Except this time, she did. "Later," Kaname smirked, moving her hands around to Momomi's back and pulling her closer. "I have promises to keep first. We'll get there in good time."

Eve watched from a distance as her fellow Keeper slowly closed the book and placed it back onto its shelf. "I'm sorry, Lilith," she called gently.

The smile Lilith gave her was a little sad, but only a little. "I'm not," she replied. "She wants to do the right thing, and I can respect that. That Momomi cow will probably find a way to screw it up, but I really am pulling for them."

" *I know you are," Eve smiled, once again marveling at how much her sister/wife/lover had changed.*

" *And anyway," Lilith went on, giving Eve a hard look that indicated that the old Lilith was not gone entirely, "I'm nothing if not patient. I've had lots of time to refine that skill, as you know."*

That night, Kaname indeed kept all of her promises, and took great pleasure in doing so.

In the end, though, rather than the hazy, pleasant afterglow to which they had grown accustomed, Kaname found herself with a sobbing Momomi holding her like a drowning woman might cling to her last lifeline.

"Stay with me," Momomi kept repeating amidst her tears. "Tell me we'll make this work. Tell me you'll fight for me."

Even as she whispered assurances, Kaname felt an all too familiar crush of shame for hurting this girl as much as she obviously had. She never would have guessed, even after all this time, that Momomi's own emotions might run so deeply as this. She'd underestimated her lover all along.

She wished that she'd never doubted whether there was something here worth saving.

Next: Advice

AUTHOR'S NOTE: And that's a year. Wow. A year since I took the first chapter of Red Bows and tossed it against the Internet to see if it would stick. Since then, the four Yamiberry stories (Red Bows in Her hair, Hand Me Downs, Strange Fire and At Exactly What Point Did I Lose Control Of This Flirting) have received over 13000 hits between them, which is more than I could ever have expected. Thank you for

the hits, the reviews and the support along the way. It's been a fun year!

Also, this chapter, particularly the bits with Kaname and Momomi, was brought to you by the song *Tomorrow*, by Ladytron.

Advice

Crazy game, I never should have started to play

But now you couldn't tear me away

-Indigo Girls

Part 6: Advice

Kaname arrived on the soccer field late Saturday morning, two small duffel bags carried in one hand and two staves over the opposite shoulder, just as Hazuki was wrapping up the morning workout with her crowd of would-be T'ai Chi practitioners. "Azuma-san," she called, letting her voice carry just a note of challenge.

"Kenjō-san," Hazuki acknowledged, her face creasing as she took in her former president's appearance. "If you're here for the morning workout, you just missed it."

"Ever used a bo staff before, Azuma-san?" Kaname smirked, noting that their exchange had caught the attention of pretty much everyone present.

"Not as such. I used a tree branch once in a pinch, but never an actual staff."

"Good; neither have I," Kaname nodded, pitching one of the two staves to Hazuki, who caught it deftly. She then tossed one of the duffels at the other girl's feet. "I'd say it's high time we learned." She searched the crowd for Chikaru and Tamao, and found both of them staring at her, the former with an arched eyebrow and the latter with confusion and perhaps anxiety. Not that she could blame them, really.

Hazuki turned to her students. "Well, ladies, it appears I've been challenged. That was good work today, and I hope to see you all next weekend."

Even as the crowd dispersed amidst the buzz of hushed conversation, Kaname unzipped her duffel and removed her new sparring gear, starting with the head-guard. After she had it strapped on, she looked up to see Hazuki staring down at her. "What's this all about?" the younger girl asked.

"Continuing the friendly spars, remember? I thought we should add a little variety. Go ahead and open it - I had to guess at your size, but it should be okay."

"Thank you… I think," Hazuki replied, crouching down to open the other bag and remove a matching set of new gear. "You didn't have to, you know. I have my own."

"Making you go back to your room for it would have taken away all the drama, though," Kaname grinned as she tightened her protective gloves. "And I am nothing if not dramatic."

"Glad to see you're comfortable with that, at least," Hazuki nodded.

Having finished first, Kaname took an opportunity to stretch, and as she did, she noted with some satisfaction that pretty much all of Hazuki's brood had joined the normal crowd of onlookers in the stands to watch. Always nice to play for an audience.

A few moments later, she turned to square off with Hazuki, then immediately burst out laughing at the sight of her. Her fellow samurai had made a valiant attempt to tuck her enormous ponytail out of the way, but as it ended up, her hair was more or less exploding out from the confines of the helmet.

"You'd tell me if I looked stupid, right?" Hazuki commented dryly.

"You don't really need me to tell you, do you?" Kaname chortled.

Hazuki answered with a smile and a jab with one end of the staff, which Kaname blocked, and then there was no more talking.

About ninety minutes of furious sparring later, the two combatants headed to the locker room of the Spica sports complex for a much-needed shower. Neither of them had managed to land a single blow against the other, but Kaname was nothing short of exhilarated. "That was almost, but not quite, better than sex."

"I'm glad to hear Momomi's place in your life is secure," Hazuki snorted.

Kaname arched her eyebrows. It made sense that Hazuki would know about their reconciliation, given who she was sleeping with. Rather than continue on that subject, though, she went back to their recent battle. "Anyway, it was nice to be on an even footing for a change. I had you on your heels, didn't I?"

"I thought it best to remain mostly on the defensive."

"Which means I had you on your heels."

"Which *means*," Hazuki said quietly, "that I was concerned that you might use too much force."

Kaname blinked a few times as she turned to the other girl, who was paying unusually close attention to the combination of her locker. "Really?" she asked, feeling a strange clench of dismay in her chest. "After all this, you still think I'd…"

"No," Hazuki said quickly. "Not on purpose, anyway. But you're new to this, Kaname. Where were you holding the staff when we fought?"

She thought about this for a moment. "A little off-center. Maybe a quarter of the way from the end."

"And where was I holding it?"

"Right in the center," Kaname replied, still not sure where this was going.

"So in our first spar with weapons we'd never used before, you naturally went for a grip that allows you to strike with greater force, but isn't as good for being able to block quickly. I went for a grip that let me block with both ends of the staff, but wouldn't let me hit quite so hard."

"So I'm offensive, and you're defensive," Kaname shrugged, and then, finding herself unable to resist, she smirked and went on. "Explains a lot about our respective sex lives, no doubt."

Hazuki actually blushed at this, but immediately covered it with a scowl. "There's something you may not have figured out yet about *Souma*," she said quietly. "It may do a lot for us, but it doesn't make us indestructible. If we really went full-out, one of us would probably take the other's head off."

For a moment, Kaname wanted to argue, but then she remembered that spar on the equestrian grounds, when she had landed a furious blow to Hazuki's forehead, actually causing the other girl to briefly collapse, *Souma* and all. If Kaname had managed that with just her normal human strength… "So you held back? You held back to keep me from going too far?"

"You did, too, for what it's worth," Hazuki continued. "In the end, I think part of you realized how far we could safely take things, but I'll admit I wasn't sure at first."

Kaname felt a sudden roil of emotions ranging from dread at the thought of what a mistake on that field might have meant, to frustration at how much she still did not know about her new "gift," to annoyance that just when she thought she was getting back some of the upper hand with Hazuki, the younger girl was once again proving herself to be the one with all the wisdom and experience.

"I'll be more careful," she said at last as she began to undress. "Can we still spar, then?"

"Only if we get to take turns picking the weapons," Hazuki chuckled.

"It's a deal."

Once finished undressing, Kaname grabbed a fresh towel from her locker and turned to Hazuki. To her amusement, her sparring partner was very pointedly undressing with her back turned to the older girl. "What's this, then? She lets me see her scars, but won't let me see her t*ts?"

Hazuki flashed a frown over her shoulder as she grabbed a towel of her own. "Is this your standard method of flirting? Because if it is, it's just as well you and Momomi are back together: it'd be painful to see you on the open market." That said, she headed off to the shower stalls.

"You don't know what you're missing," Kaname called in a singsong voice as she followed. Her grin deepened as she realized that here, at least, was somewhere that she might still have that upper hand. She took the stall next to Hazuki and smiled over the top of the partition, taking what was no doubt an unhealthy amount of enjoyment from her companion's discomfort.

"That's as may be," Hazuki muttered. "And how *are* you and Momomi?"

"Better than I could have hoped," Kaname said in all honesty. Things weren't perfect, by any means: Momomi had spent the last week in a haze of preoccupation and detachment, but her focus certainly returned every night once the lights were out…

"I didn't want to assume anything, but she looks exhausted," Hazuki commented as she began the laborious process of shampooing. "You may only need a couple hours of sleep now, but go easy on her, will you?"

" *She's* been the insatiable one," Kaname shrugged, amused to find herself discussing this with Hazuki, of all people. "Of course, unlike you, I don't have the luxury of having *two* partners to wear me out. That is… unless you wanted to try out a *different* threesome for a night?"

The last barb had the desired effect of making Hazuki literally squirm with discomfort. "Again, if that's your best, it's just as well you're out of the dating pool."

"You don't know what you're missing," Kaname repeated in the same singsong tone as before.

Hazuki let out a loud, tense sigh, and for a moment Kaname wondered if she had gone too far. "Christ, Hazuki, I'm only teasing. You're making it too easy for me."

"It's not a matter of not knowing what I'm missing," Hazuki said from behind a curtain of wet hair. Her tone was something very un-Hazuki-like, and thoughts of further banter quickly went by the wayside.

"What is it, then? Seriously?"

Hazuki slicked her hair back from her forehead and looked across the partition, her eyes blazing. "It's a matter of not knowing what I'm doing."

"Not… knowing..?" Kaname repeated, but it didn't take long to figure out what Hazuki meant.

"I'm a terrible lesbian, okay? I love my long hair, I enjoy the feeling of lace and silk once in a while, and I'm so busy with school and practice and teaching my clubs that I don't even have the time to devote to corrupting our nation's youth."

"Slacker."

"Most of all, though, I have no… idea… *at all*… what to do in bed. I'm absolutely making it up as I go along."

Kaname was too shocked at this open admission to reply, at least right away. "Well, *this* came out of nowhere," she said at length.

"So if there's any wisdom a more… *experienced* sister of Sappho could provide, it would be appreciated." And now Hazuki was blushing more deeply than Kaname thought possible.

"Azuma Hazuki," Kaname said quietly, "are *you* asking *me* for advice about sex?"

"I suppose I am," Hazuki sighed as she turned away and looked fixedly at the shower head.

There was a long pause, and then Kaname started to laugh.

"You could just say no and be done with it," Hazuki growled.

"Wait, wait, I just want to bask in this feeling a little longer."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Kaname gave a louder bark of laughter as she heard her own past words returned to her. "Damn right I am."

"This was a mistake," Hazuki muttered as she went back to soaping herself off.

"I'm sorry, really. It's just the irony of the situation, that's all."

"I can't tell you how tired I'm getting of irony."

"Seriously, though, why me?" Kaname asked, making an effort to rein in the humor. "How in the world did I land on the top of your list of people to ask for advice?"

"You weren't exactly at the *top*," Hazuki snorted.

"Near enough to the top that you're asking, then."

Hazuki shot her a look of borderline amusement. "Well, when I went down my *list*, I realized I can't ask Tamao or Chikaru, for reasons I hope would be obvious. I can't ask Eve because I used to be in love with her. I can't ask Lilith because I'd never live it down. I can't ask Shizuma because I don't know her well enough to be sure she'd keep it from Nagisa. I can't ask Nagisa because I think my self-esteem would burst into flames and die screaming if I did. I can't ask Amane or Hikari because I'm not convinced either of them even knows what sex is. I can't ask Chou'un because after the obligatory I-Told-You-So she'd probably insist on advising through demonstration, and besides, she's in a completely different world. I can't ask Mutsumi because she's in yet another different world, and Eve and Lilith might ask uncomfortable questions if I asked for a lift. I can't ask…"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Kaname relented, holding up both hands to stop the litany of names. "I wasn't near the top of the list. But the fact that I was on it at all? A little shocking."

"I… trust you," Hazuki said, turning once more to meet Kaname's eyes. "Please don't make me regret it."

"Okay, okay," Kaname repeated, smiling wryly. "So you don't know what you're doing and you need my advice."

"I already said that."

"Yeah, but I just like the way it sounds out loud."

"Kaname…"

"Fine. If you want my advice, you've got it." She leaned closer, until her chin was almost resting on the partition between them. "Keep making it up as you go along."

Hazuki frowned. "But…"

"Seriously, that's the *fun* part."

"Fun? It's *fun* to be all 'Did that feel good?' 'Well, sort of…'"

"Of *course* it is! At the very least, you're naked in bed with another girl. If you can't find the inherent fun in *that*, you really *are* a terrible lesbian. Stop worrying and *enjoy* it. Honestly, bad sex is bad sex, but even *that's* still better than most anything else in this f***ed-up world."

"But then what? Just figure out what she- what they like and keep doing that?"

Kaname noticed the slip, but decided to file it away for later. "That's fine to start with, but that leads into my next bit of advice."

"And what's that?"

"For the love of God, don't take the easy way out. Don't rest on your laurels once you've got a better idea of which buttons to push. Don't assume you've learned the combination and let it turn into routine."

Hazuki looked puzzled, but by this time Kaname found that she could not stop the words from coming. "Don't let yourself get bored, because then you might start thinking that you need something else, when all you needed was right there the whole time, and the change you think you wanted could have been your own making if you'd just remembered that feeling… that feeling of making it up as you go along…"

Feeling suddenly very vulnerable, Kaname turned off the water and grabbed her towel. "Don't waste it," she said in a low voice, then started drying her face so she could pretend it had just been water in her eyes.

"I feel like I've been hearing those words a lot lately," Hazuki nodded, "but thank you."

That was, effectively, the end of the conversation, as Kaname did not want to say anything to further along her own turmoil, and Hazuki, thankfully, did not press the issue. They traded the normal pleasantries after getting dressed, took their separate paths back to the dormitory, and that was that.

As she walked on alone, Kaname wondered not for the first time which made her feel worse: the reminder of how much she had hurt Momomi, or the fact that even mindful of this, she could not bring herself to truly regret her brief time with Lilith.

The car that had picked them up was spotless, its driver dressed in an impeccably pressed and finely tailored suit. The estate to which they had been driven consisted of endless acres of lush green, with the mansion at its center both sprawling and architecturally perfect. The maids and butlers who had escorted them inside had been deferent and flawless in the synchronicity of their actions. The sofa on which Momomi now sat between her parents was no doubt a priceless antique, and the sitting room in which they waited was larger than the dining area of Strawberry Hall.

Momomi was no stranger to wealth, being from one of the top-tier families in the Kyoto prefecture. This, however, was something well beyond even her experience.

After a long wait, during which her parents chatted nervously while Momomi tried not to think about anything at all, two men were escorted into the room by a phalanx of maids. The Kiyashiki elders quickly rose to their feet, pulling Momomi absently to hers as well, and then all three bowed to the new arrivals. Her father then stepped forward, and after making a second, deeper bow to the older of the two men, he looked back at Momomi and beckoned her to come forward.

"Kinoshita-sama," her father said in a firm, businesslike voice, "may I have the honor of presenting to you my daughter, Momomi."

Momomi bowed obediently. Kinoshita-sama was a balding, somewhat stout man who appeared to be about fifty, and he was looking her over with an appraising, though not unkind expression on his hard-lined face. "The pleasure is mine, Kiyashiki-san. And in turn, it is my honor to present to you my son, Kazuharu…"

Only then did Momomi dare to look at the younger of the two men. The family resemblance was clear enough, even if the Kinoshita son was a head taller and stocky rather than stout. What caught Momomi's attention most, though, was the look on his face. He simply could not take his eyes off of her, but rather than gawking or even leering, his expression wore the muffled shock of someone trying desperately not to let on how much he could not believe his good fortune.

"… your daughter's new fiancé."

It was pouring down rain by the time classes ended for the day, so Kaname elected to take her afternoon run to Spica's indoor gym. A treadmill was even more boring than the track, but it would have to do.

Since coming back from her weekend family trip (the details of which she would not disclose), Momomi had been more distant and distracted than ever, and Kaname was beginning to feel frustration set in. While their nocturnal activities were in many ways more intense and satisfying than ever, and while every night ended with Momomi clinging to her tightly and again begging her to never leave, their days were something else entirely. Momomi was keeping something from her, and Kaname wondered how much longer it would take to regain the trust she had lost.

Worst of all, this time she had only herself to blame.

She ran until she'd outlasted all of the afternoon gym-goers (some of them casting her amazed looks as they left) and had the place to herself. Then, she dialed up the speed on the machine as far as it

would go, and sprinted for a good twenty minutes. Here, at last, she found some measure of inner peace as her own breathing drowned out the noise in her head, and her vision shrank to the tiniest pinpoint on the rain-streaked windows opposite her. Soon, even that was lost, as her *Souma* surged to the point that her entire world was consumed with green.

Eventually, though, she regained her senses enough to turn down the speed and resume a less intense pace. She noted with some satisfaction that she'd managed to build up a good sweat this time, and even felt a little winded. Somehow it was comforting to know that she still had limits to push.

"That was impressive," came a voice from nearby. "I thought you were going to kill that poor machine, to be honest."

Kaname looked to her left to see Chikaru smiling at her as she briskly walked on the treadmill next to Kaname's own. "When did you start using the gym?" Kaname panted, looking the other girl over. She was dressed the part, certainly, wearing cross-trainers, a pair of bicycle shorts and a tight-fitting sport top. She'd even eschewed her hair bows for a sensible ponytail.

"I thought I'd give some extra cardio a try," Chikaru shrugged. "Let's just say that working with Hazuki-chan has given me a new appreciation for increasing my stamina."

" *Working* with her, eh?" Kaname snorted.

"And yes, I'm talking about martial arts."

"Of course you are. So why now?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Kaname turned down the speed a bit more so that she could better catch her breath to continue speaking. "Why now, with me here? Why plunk yourself down right next door to me and start chatting me

up? You and I have been a lot of things, Minamoto-san, but we've *never* been friends."

"Perhaps it's time for that to change," Chikaru said with a soft, mischievous smile. "We're far more alike than different, now more than ever. Which reminds me! When are you going to take us up on the offer to work with us on meditation?"

"Maybe I don't want to disrupt your cozy little coven? Four's bad luck, remember."

"Superstitions are meant to be conveniently disregarded," Chikaru waved, "and the offer stands. We can even schedule it for sometime other than the middle of the night, so you don't have to explain to Momomi-san where you're off to."

Again, Kaname gave a single snort of laughter. Word had indeed gotten around.

The conversation lapsed, leaving only the mechanical sounds of the treadmills' motors, but then Chikaru again broke the silence. "If I may, Kaname-san, I'd like to ask your opinion on something."

"My opinion? What's *my* opinion to you?" Kaname was aware that she was being more difficult than she had to be, but her thoughts were too sour to care.

"You have… personal experiences that I do not," Chikaru said carefully. "Your opinion is actually of great interest to me on this subject."

Kaname's eyes widened as the implications hit. "Oh, Christ, you're not going to ask me for advice about sex…" She bit back before she could add "too?" and then wondered briefly why she would instinctively protect Hazuki in this way.

"Not sex," Chikaru said, shaking her head, "but sexuality."

"Ahh," Kaname nodded. "Need some advice from the more butch side of things?"

"I was actually wondering where you stood on the concept of nature versus nurture?"

Kaname blinked at her. "Come again?"

"Do you think that sexuality is something that's hard-wired into us, or do you think it's more fluid than that, and can be influenced by environment?"

"I… why are you asking *me* this? Your older sister is a… life-bearing goddess or something. Shouldn't you be asking her?"

"I don't exactly have her on speed-dial," Chikaru laughed. "Besides, you have experiences relevant to the subject. Have you always been attracted to women?"

"As opposed to what?"

"As opposed to… having had something happen in your life that either pulled your affections toward women or… pushed them away from men?"

Kaname shot the Lulim president a dangerous glare. Chikaru was trying that same old Minamoto trick again, of looking right through her. And once again, damn her, it was working, as Kaname found herself forcibly pushing back memories of some of the darker places in her youth. "None of your business, Chikaru."

"I sense I've trod where I oughtn't, but at least you're using my name now."

"Again, why are you asking me this? Of what *possible* interest is it to you?"

There was a long pause, and Chikaru's face darkened with thought. "It interests me, Kaname-san, because as near as I can figure, I'm

neither straight, gay, bisexual nor any variant thereof. I have no sexuality whatsoever. I sleep next to two beautiful women several times a week, whom I love more dearly than anything in this world and would happily spend eternity with, and somehow I've *yet* to muster up the desire to want to be physically intimate with them. And as you might imagine, this… *troubles* me."

The blunt admission stunned Kaname to the point that she nearly let the treadmill push her right off. She quickly dialed it down to walking speed, then looked back to Chikaru. "Why did you tell me that?" she asked, wondering what sort of fundamental shift had occurred in this world to make both Hazuki and Chikaru actually *confide* in her.

"I'm asking you personal questions," Chikaru said simply. "It's only fair that I offer something personal of mine in return." She then gave a smaller version of her normal knowing smile. "Besides, if you try to throw this into the rumor mill, no one will believe it. They have too much fun imagining how Hazuki-chan, Tamao-chan and I manage to contort our limbs around one another."

Kaname then remembered the moment when Hazuki had used the word "she" and corrected herself to "they" while talking about sex. "So… just the other two, then?"

"That's not for me to say, and it's getting away from my original question. Now that you know my stake in it, I'm more curious than ever to hear your opinion. Do you think sexuality is something that can change, or do you think we are what we are from birth?"

"I… haven't really thought about it," Kaname frowned, again trying to force her memories to behave themselves. "Honestly, though, I can't think of a time that boys held any interest for me at all. I mean… I kind of enjoy being a deviant, but I don't think I'm doing it out of any kind of rebellion, or anything like that. I think that… even if things had been different for me as a kid, I still would have ended up liking girls."

"So… do you lean toward nature rather than nurture?"

"I don't know… I guess so." Her frown deepened. "That's not what you wanted to hear, though, is it?"

"Not really, but thank you all the same. And I can take hope in the idea that our situation, being what we are now, is peculiar enough that the rules may not necessarily apply to us anyway."

"Well, if I can keep piling on the bad news, then," Kaname chuckled grimly, "if you can't be gay for *those* two, I don't know that there's *any* hope for you joining our team."

To Kaname's surprise, Chikaru smiled at this. "Why, Kaname-san! I'm sure that Tamao-chan and *particularly* Hazuki-chan would be *thrilled* to know you said that!"

All the blood left Kaname's face. "You wouldn't *dare* ..!"

No sooner had Hazuki entered Strawberry Hall after her day's classes than she found herself flanked on either side by Kizuna and Remon. "Hi there, Hazuki-senpai!" Kizuna grinned cheerfully.

Hello, Kizuna-san… Remon-san," Hazuki nodded to one and then the next. "Um, is there something you need?"

Each of the younger girls took one of her arms and began steering her toward the Lulim wing of the building. "We were hoping for the chance to see you," Remon smiled, looking across to Kizuna and waggling her eyebrows.

The pigtailed girl picked up the narration, and Hazuki had to wonder if they always took turns speaking in this manner. "You see, we've recently… *learned* something about you that we hadn't *at all* expected, and we thought we might be of help to you."

"Learned something?" Hazuki repeated.

"Oh, yes, but don't worry, your secret's safe with us," Remon nodded enthusiastically.

The shoe dropped, and Hazuki felt her stomach do so as well. Had Kaname said something? Had someone been listening outside the shower stalls, in spite of Hazuki's senses having told her otherwise? How had word gotten out about her inexperience?

And more importantly, how on Earth were Kizuna and Remon going to help her with that? Was she about to get a lecture on sex from a pair of fourteen-year-olds?

Still somewhat in a daze, Hazuki found herself ushered into the two Lulim girls' shared room. "Remon-chan… get out the treasure chest," Kizuna intoned dramatically.

"Aye, aye," Remon saluted, then reached under her bed to pull out a small locked trunk.

Oh God, thought Hazuki, *they're going to show me their stash of lesbian porn.*

"Here we are, Hazuki-senpai," Remon smiled as she heaved the trunk up onto her bed and began working with the combination locks holding it closed. "I think you're going to like this."

"Girls, I don't know if I should…" Hazuki began, but Remon was already opening the case, allowing Kizuna to reach in and pull out several DVD cases.

"What do you think?" Kizuna grinned, all but shoving the brightly colored boxes under Hazuki's nose, causing the taller girl to back away slightly, trying very hard not to look.

"Don't worry, Hazuki-senpai," Remon assured her. "You can hold them. We're always willing to share with a fellow otaku."

"Otaku?" Hazuki repeated, finally daring to look at the DVDs and see what they really were. "Anime..?" she said, incredulously.

"It's our secret stash," Kizuna giggled. "You have no idea how happy we were when we found out you were a fan!"

"It's like rich girls don't think it's okay to be nerds, or something," Remon sighed.

"Will you watch with us sometime, Hazuki-senpai? It's so much nicer in more company. Chikaru-onee-sama tries *so* hard, but I don't know that she'll ever be a *fan*, not like we are."

"Well… sure," Hazuki nodded, still dazed with relief. "Um, what do you have?"

Remon considered the boxes in her hand while Kizuna went to dig some more out of the trunk. "Well, let's see… if you want otaku comedy, we've got *Nogizaka Haruka no Himitsu*…"

"Or if you want horror, we've got *Hell Girl*…"

"Ooh, or if you want your horror with lots of gratuitous sex and violence, we've got *Daughters of Mnemosyne*…"

"Or if you want action with lots of fanservice, here's *Witchblade*…"

"Or if you just want fanservice, we could always go with *Girls Bravo*…"

Kizuna looked up at Hazuki with wide, pleading eyes that were straight out of an anime themselves. "Will you have a watching party with us sometime, Hazuki-senpai? Please?"

"Please?" Remon echoed, making similar puppy-dog eyes.

"Okay, okay," Hazuki relented, laughing in spite of herself. "Just so long as it's not *Ikki Tousen* . I can't bring myself to watch that one anymore."

"Awwwwww!"

After a couple of days, the rain had cleared sufficiently for Kaname to take her lunch outside again. She preferred it this way, to be honest, even with Momomi unable to join her due to Council commitments. Somehow her patience for being in crowded dining halls or student lounges had worn thinner than ever. Endless schoolgirls talking about classes and gossip and grades and all that other crap… as if *any* of it mattered. Out here in the courtyard behind St. Spica, she could count on being left alone.

Midway through her meal, though, she became aware that someone else was indeed approaching her. She waited for whoever it was to go by, but the footsteps stopped just short of her, and she looked up to see someone in a Miator uniform standing at a respectful distance. "Suzumi-san?" she asked.

"Good afternoon, Kenjō-san," Tamao smiled hesitantly. "May I join you?"

"Kaname indicated the empty space beside her on the bench. "If you like. You're a long way from Miator."

"Oh, I have a free period after lunch today, so I thought I'd come visit. I've… been meaning to talk to you, actually, and I haven't had the chance."

Part of Kaname had been expecting this, really. After her recent conversations with Hazuki and Chikaru, she figured it was only a matter of time before Tamao came along to confide something embarrassingly personal as well. "What's on your mind?"

Tamao sat on the opposite end of the bench, then took a careful look around before she spoke. "Well, you and I are sort of in a similar situation, so I guess I wanted to… compare notes?"

"You mean about *Souma?* " Kaname asked.

"Yes. I was wondering if you could satisfy my curiosity on something. What does *Souma* feel like for you?"

Kaname raised her eyebrows. Maybe she'd manage to have a conversation that wasn't about sex after all. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've got this new energy inside of us, and… it *moves*, pretty much all the time. What does that motion… remind you of?"

Then again, maybe this *was* heading toward sex. "I don't follow you, Suzumi-san."

Tamao looked a little flustered at her own inability to make her point. "What I mean is… well, can I show you?" She then raised one hand between herself and Kaname, palm toward the older girl.

"I don't know, Suzumi-san," Kaname smirked. "What would your girlfriends say?" Tamao blushed, and made to lower her hand, but Kaname sighed and raised her own to within inches of Tamao's. "Can *anybody* take a joke anymore?"

After a moment of hesitation, Tamao pressed the palm of her hand against Kaname's, and suddenly it was all too easy to feel that *Souma* in motion. "You see," Tamao explained, "to me *Souma* feels like a warm wind. Can you feel it as well?"

"Um, yeah," Kaname nodded slowly. Now that she'd been given the wind imagery, she could feel it quite clearly from the *Souma* passing from Tamao's hand to her own.

Tamao dropped her hand, and the wind immediately died down. "Chikaru-sama, Hazuki-chan and I each feel it differently. I was wondering how it felt to you?"

"I never really gave it much thought," Kaname admitted. "Why do you want to know, though? Is this some sort of Maker thing, where you need to know everything works?"

"Just… curiosity," Tamao shrugged. "You don't have to tell me if you'd rather not…"

By this time, though, Kaname's curiosity was piqued as well, so she closed her eyes and pondered her energy. "Yeah, it moves," she said slowly, "but it's not like wind. It's… heavier than that. More like… liquid."

"Oh, so it flows like water? That would make sense, really, since…"

"No, not really like water," Kaname went on. "It's too slow for that. Too thick. But it definitely feels like liquid… sort of a warm, thick syrup, maybe?"

For some reason, this seemed to excite Tamao to no end. "You mean like molten lava, maybe?"

"Maybe," Kaname nodded. "Tell you what, Suzumi-san. Let me spend a little more time feeling it out, and I'll get back to you."

"Thank you, Kenjō-san," Tamao smiled, bowing her head slightly. "I'd appreciate that."

Kaname smiled back, then took a sip from her juice box. Tamao fidgeted nervously for a moment, then spoke again. "There was… something else I wanted to compare notes about, though, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Fire away."

"You see… you're really the only one I can ask about this. We both got our *Souma* at the same time, and… I know I'm still a teenager, but I can't help wondering if the *Souma* might have something to do with what's happening, so I wanted to ask you if maybe you were going through some of the same things, and…"

"What are you trying to say, Suzumi-san?" Kaname sighed.

"Well, it's just that…" Tamao blushed and looked away. "None of my bras quite fit me anymore."

Kaname nearly ended up expelling her juice through her nose.

Shizuma stifled a yawn as she walked up the short ramp to her apartment door and fished in her bag for her keys. She had spent far longer at the library than she would have liked, particularly for a Friday night, but her forthcoming exams promised to be brutal. Best to go over the most recent material while it was still fresh.

Just as she closed her fingers around her keychain, however, a strange voice from directly behind froze her in her tracks. "Ah, silver-haired beauty. Our initial meeting was far too brief - such a pleasure to lay my eyes upon your inestimable form again."

After a long, still pause, Shizuma spoke without turning around. "I will have you know that I currently have a can of pepper spray in my hand, and failing that, I am well versed in several forms of martial arts, two of which do not frown on groin shots."

There was a sound not unlike a squawk, and then the voice spoke again, sounding a bit more nervous this time. "You misunderstand me, madam. I mean you no harm. And while I could probably endure the kicks, I have no desire to find out what this pepper spray of yours might be."

"Then you'll leave immediately?"

"As it happens, dear lady, I cannot leave, and certainly would not do so without first delivering my message. I bring greetings from the one known to you as Minamoto Naoko."

"Naoko-sama?" Shizuma gasped, and only then did she turn around to find a round yellow bird hovering just behind her, its tiny wings beating furiously as it struggled to keep its not inconsiderable mass airborne. "You- you're that bird..!"

"You remember!" the bird twittered. "My name is Ken, but you may call me Ken-chan if you wish. I allow it of the beautiful ladies in my life."

After taking a look around to make certain that none of her neighbors were watching her have this conversation with a parakeet, Shizuma held one hand out, palm-up, and Ken-chan landed gratefully with an audible grunt and a sigh. "Thank you, my darling," the bird smiled (no, she wasn't imagining it - it actually managed to twist its beak into a smile) as it ruffled its feathers and briefly preened itself.

"So… what are you doing here?" Shizuma asked. "You have a… message from Naoko-sama?"

"Indeed," Ken-chan nodded as he re-folded his wings over his back. "My lady Eve, the live-giver to the worlds of the Great Library, sends both her greetings and her apologies that she could not make this visit in person."

"Very well, but why visit me in the first place?"

"Because, dear lady, you are the only one in this world who knows the true nature of our existence, and is not currently residing on Astraea Hill… that inestimable paradise of loveliness, filled with beauty in so many shapes and sizes…" Ken-chan's voice trailed off, and he looked as though he might start drooling onto Shizuma's hand, but then he shook himself. "I'm sorry, where was I?"

"Perving."

"Ah, of course, Astraea Hill. Lady Eve also wishes to convey further apology for the nature of this visit, which she knows will be difficult for you, and humbly asks your forgiveness. Truly, though, given the nature of your visitor, we had no choice but to come to you, as her appearance on Astraea Hill would doubtless have created quite an unwelcome stir."

"Wait… visitor?" Shizuma asked. "Other than you? And what does she mean, difficult?"

"Your visitor waits inside your apartment," Ken-chan explained. "I stayed out here in order to give you fair warning that things are… well, not entirely as they seem, and hopefully to ease your forthcoming shock."

Shizuma's heart jumped at these words, and she found her mind seized by a realization she could not yet put a name to. She whirled back toward the door, dropping a squawking Ken-chan as she hastened to unlock it. After the small eternity of getting the door open, she rushed into the apartment and looked around the living room. "Who's here?" she asked in a tight voice.

There was no immediate answer, and for a moment the only sounds were Shizuma's own pulse in her ears, and Ken-chan fluttering in behind her.

Then, someone stepped into the open doorway to the kitchen, all but her silhouette lost to the light behind her. "Hello, Shizuma-san," said a soft voice that Shizuma thought she would never hear again. "I hope you don't mind… but while I was waiting, I… made tea..?"

Shizuma felt her thoughts freeze one by one as the young woman stepped out into the comparatively dim light of the living room and gave Shizuma a small, uncertain smile. Time slowed to a crawl as they stared at one another, and from a great distance, Shizuma heard her own fragile voice break the silence.

"… Kaori..?"

Next: Ghost

Ghost

And there's not enough room in this world for my pain

Signals cross and love gets lost, and time passed makes it plain

Of all my demon spirits I need you the most

I'm in love with your ghost

-Indigo Girls

Part 7: Ghost

Elsewhere…

It always rained at funerals. Everyone knew that. It was common sense.

Not that Kaori had been able to go to the funeral, of course, which was restricted to family only. It was amazing enough that Rokujō-sama had even allowed this visit to the family shrine, all things considered. Kaori knew she should thank Shizuma for this, and she promised that she would. Just… not yet.

And so, under an infuriatingly cloudless blue sky, Kaori watched as her three companions each knelt in turn at the small stone marker to say a prayer. First Hanazono Shizuma, bearing a bouquet of white lilies, followed by her girlfriend and former council assistant Aoi Nagisa, then by fellow council assistant and Miator president-elect Suzumi Tamao. Then, at last, it was her turn to kneel and pay her final respects.

Her eyes trailed over the familiar kanji characters carved elegantly into the stone, and not for the first time, those eyes sought to prove

that yes, she still had plenty of tears left to shed. Somehow she hadn't yet managed to use them all.

Hello, Miyuki…

"Would you like some time alone?" Shizuma asked quietly as she laid a gentle hand on Kaori's shoulder. She had known Miyuki longer than any of them, but she was obviously holding back her own grief for Kaori's sake.

"But… Rokujō-sama said…" Nagisa began, but she could not bring herself to complete the thought. She was right, too: Rokujō-sama had only relented sufficiently to allow Kaori's presence at all after Shizuma had couched it as a chance for the Etoile of Astraea to honor her colleague. He obviously knew the rumors, but he could not refuse once it had been put on that footing. Still, he had been very clear that Kaori would be accompanied by Shizuma at all times while on Rokujō grounds.

"You let me handle Rokujō-sama," Shizuma replied in a low, dangerous voice. "We'll be waiting outside the shrine, Kaori-chan. Take as long as you need."

"Thank you, President Hanazono-san," Kaori said in a flat, robotic voice. She knew, deep down, that the forced formality would probably hurt Shizuma, but she could not bring herself to say more, lest she completely lose what little composure she had left. She'd have to owe her an apology as well as thanks for the time being.

The hand slipped from her shoulder, and two sets of footsteps slowly receded. Kaori didn't need to think too hard to guess who'd remained.

"I'm so sorry, Kaori," Tamao whispered. Tamao, her best friend. Not that Tamao remembered why they had become friends in the first place, of course. Not that anyone remembered anymore except Kaori herself.

"Tamao-chan, I'd like to be alone for a while, please."

"I know these have to be the most hollow words in the world, Kaori-chan, but… this isn't your fault."

And then her footsteps receded as well, while Kaori stared fixedly at the grave marker, biting her lip to keep herself from speaking. *Of course it's my fault, Tamao-chan. Miyuki commits ritual suicide with a family blade rather than allow herself to go through with her marriage and be separated from me - exactly whose fault IS that, if not mine?*

As if in response to her thoughts, or even in answer to her prayers, she heard another voice: one she thought she would never hear again. "My dear sister… She's right, you know: you aren't to blame."

Kaori slowly turned to look behind her, wondering if perhaps she might be going mad, but there she was: the one who had once been her adored little sister Futaba-chan, gazing at her with sympathy in those huge, reddish-brown eyes.

"Eve," she whispered.

The goddess who had been her sister nodded and gave her a tiny smile. "Hello, onee-chan."

In one swift uncoiling motion, Kaori sprang to her feet, whirled around, took three steps and backhanded the smile from that gentle face. Eve fell to the soft earth, more in shock than with the force of the blow, but before Kaori could land another, she found her wrist gripped by another strong hand. "Now, now. As often as I've wanted to do that myself in the past, that's more than enough."

"Let go of me, *Lilith*," Kaori spat, saying her other sister's real name as though it were a curse. "How *dare* you come back to me now?"

Eve raised one hand to her cheek, which was already red where it had been struck. "You were grieving," she said incredulously. "I

wanted to pay my respects to your beloved, and comfort my sister in her time of need."

"Your *respects?* " Kaori shrieked, yanking her hand free of Lilith's grasp and taking a step back to face off with both of them. "That's laughable. Well, go ahead, she's right there, or at least her name is. Not that she'd know who *you* are anymore. Not since you abandoned me here with this… *thing* inside me, surrounded by friends and family who somehow didn't remember that I used to have sisters, or that the world nearly ended for all of us! Do you have *any* idea what it's been like, having to hold all of this inside me? I couldn't even bring myself to tell the woman I loved, and now I couldn't if I wanted to, because she's *dead!* "

"You had the right to know," Eve said in a soft, shaky voice, as Lilith helped her stand. "I couldn't bear to take your memories. You had every right to know the part you played in saving all of creation."

"Right," Kaori nodded furiously. "So you take me to this library of yours, show me that everything I ever knew about God and faith was dead wrong, and then drop me back into my perfectly healed little world. Only it's not *mine* anymore, really. *My* world had sisters in it." She glared at Lilith. "In *my* world, *you* introduced me to my best friend, and now she doesn't even remember how we met! My God, there were days that I hoped I was insane, and that this other life was just some kind of delusion, but then I'd feel this… *Souma* of yours, and I couldn't pretend. You *left* me like this, and now you want to *comfort* me? Well, *f*** you!"

Eve was slowly shaking her head as tears spilled from her huge, hurt eyes, but Lilith took a half-step forward and held up her hands. "We had to go, Kaori-chan. We'd done so much damage to this world as it was, and we had to write ourselves out of the story completely in order for it to heal properly. We needed to undo the damage, so we couldn't leave a trace of ourselves."

"But we had to write around you, for your own sake," Eve added. "We had to leave you with your *Souma*, because…" Lilith shot her a

glare, and she stopped.

"Because what?" Kaori scowled. "Why couldn't you have just let me forget, like everyone else?" Not that this would have helped Miyuki, she realized, but it was easier to hold onto her anger than remember her own part in this nightmare.

The two goddesses exchanged a silent look, then Eve spoke again. "When Lilith unwound our threads from the story, we had to be careful not to remove the moment when we planted the seed of your *Souma* ."

"Why? What good has it done me?"

"It saved your life," Lilith said flatly. "You were destined to die of a wasting disease at the age of thirteen. If we had completely removed ourselves, you'd be dead now."

"And you deserved better than that," Eve insisted. "Your part in our salvation may have seemed small, but if you hadn't helped Hazuki-chan and Kaname-chan when they came to you, this world and countless others would have perished. I couldn't let you die in agony after you saved us all."

Kaori's mind was spinning as she tried to process these revelations, but she found herself focusing on a single detail, and from it she seized the most fragile thread of hope. "I should have died?" she whispered.

"I couldn't," Eve whispered again, shaking her head miserably. "I couldn't allow it."

"You can," Kaori said softly, nodding to herself. She then set her shoulders and gave her erstwhile sisters a hard glare. "You can, and you will. Go back and stop it from happening. Let me die."

"Onee-chan!" Eve gasped.

For emphasis, Kaori pointed at the grave marker. "Miyuki died because I lived," she snapped. "If I'd never lived to fall in love with her, she wouldn't have killed herself. Write that part out of the story. Let me die like I was supposed to."

"But… I *can't!* " the younger goddess said in a tiny, shuddering voice.

"You *have* to!" Kaori screamed. "You say you needed to undo the damage to this world?" She shook a trembling finger at the hated stone. "Undo *that* damage, then! Do it, or I'll…" she clenched her jaw, not sure exactly *what* she would do, but then the answer came to her in a rush of what was almost relief, and she smiled grimly at the goddesses. "Or I'll do it myself. I'll find a way to use this *Souma* you gave me to unwind the threads myself."

Eve continued shaking her head, her face now a mask of horror. " *No*, Kaori, you can't *do* that!"

"Actually, she probably could, given time," Lilith nodded, crossing her arms. "She's one of mine, after all. Her methods would be crude, and might tear this entire book apart, but I wouldn't put it past her to try." She looked down at Eve and raised her eyebrows. "Never underestimate a grieving human with *Souma* . You do remember the Universal Garden, I presume?" The reference was lost to Kaori, but Eve brought one hand to her throat, as though by reflex.

Kaori didn't know why Lilith was suddenly taking her side in this, but she was more than happy to use this to press her advantage. "Do it. Let this world go on the way it was supposed to."

Still trembling, Eve closed her eyes, and for just a moment Kaori truly felt how devastating this would be to the goddess who'd been her playmate, her confidante and often her only source of comfort. To undo what she had done would tear her heart out.

Just as it looked as though Eve might be ready to acquiesce, however, Lilith raised one finger. "If you'd like," she said slowly, "I *may* be able to suggest an alternative."

"And what happened then?" Shizuma asked, not looking up from her tea. The dark liquid had long gone cold, and she had probably worn off the painted cats that adorned the surface of her mug, but to look up again meant seeing those eyes. *This is not my Kaori*, she repeated inside her own head, hoping the silent mantra would make this easier somehow.

And truly, the differences between the Kaori from that other world and her own were quite clear. Small wonder that Miyuki had fallen in love with this one: even as she told her improbable tale, this Kaori was nothing but confidence, strength and even aggression. To combine those features with the face they had both adored in this world? Her oldest friend, who had never allowed herself to fall in love, would nonetheless have never stood a chance.

The knowledge of what this had done to the other Miyuki, though, chilled Shizuma to the core, and she vividly remembered something "her" Miyuki had said during their trip to Miyazu. *You know very well that I had dreams, but as long as those dreams were hinged on something so far above me, I was safe. I could go on believing that I'd grow out of them, the way I knew I had to. If I'd ever truly fallen in love, and been loved in return… I don't know what I would have done.*

She thought of the Miyuki that had attacked her hair with clippers days before her wedding, and who had looked on the verge of snapping as she prepared for that dreaded walk down the aisle. How close had *this* Miyuki come to making that awful choice? While Shizuma had been studiously avoiding her, out of a combination of shame and not wanting to flaunt her own happiness, had Miyuki been eying a sword of her own?

How close had Shizuma come to losing her dearest friend?

Kaori's voice brought her back to the present. "They brought me back to the library, and Lilith… started pulling me out of the story. I don't really remember much after that, to be honest. It was… like

nothing I've ever experienced, and things started to get blurry." She gave a short sigh, and her voice took on a quiet, soft tone more in tune with Shizuma's memories. "I got the impression that something was wrong, though, and that it… somehow wasn't safe for me to stay there in my condition. I think that something else was trying to get into the library, and since Lilith couldn't leave the book until she wove everything back together without me, and since Eve was going to have to keep whatever it was out, they… kind of needed to send me somewhere safe, so Ken-chan brought me to this world, where there were others… *like* me. And where two of them, at least, would know me from before. I'm afraid I wasn't very… *coherent* at that point."

"That makes sense," Shizuma nodded, even though it didn't. *None* of this made sense, even after everything she'd seen in the past two months.

"But from what I understand," Kaori said delicately, "they couldn't just drop me into the middle of Astraea Hill because… the me from this world died years ago, just like *I* would have if it hadn't been for this *Souma* thing."

"Yes, you did," Shizuma went on nodding, her voice very thin and thready.

"I'm sorry, Shizuma-san," Kaori sighed. "I can only imagine what it's like to see a friend back from the dead. Um… were we close friends in this world, too?"

Shizuma bit her lip hard, but eventually gave one more nod. "We were… close."

After a long, tense silence, Shizuma set down her tea and got shakily to her feet. "I'm… going to try to call Hazuki-chan, to let her know what's happened."

"Thank you," Kaori smiled faintly. "I *would* like to see her again. I understand her story's a lot like mine; maybe she could give me some advice on what to do from here."

"I'll be right back, then," Shizuma bowed to her impossible guest, then picked up her wireless phone from the tea table, brought it into her bedroom, and softly closed the door behind her. As she dialed Hazuki's number, she wondered how much longer she was going to be able to hold herself together.

"But- but- if Kirie-san is Yukinari-san's best friend from childhood, why does she beat him up like that?"

Kizuna giggled and leaned in closer to Chiyo, who was staring at the screen with a mix of fascination and horror. "Because she's a *tsundere*, of course. It's standard in these shows. See, she secretly likes him, so she has to beat him up all the time for those accidental pervert moments."

"She's *horrible*," Chiyo grimaced as the character in question landed another bone-crunching blow on the protagonist.

"It's okay, Chiyo-chan," Remon laughed, giving their younger friend a pat on the shoulder. "It's a harem comedy. You're not supposed to take it seriously."

Hazuki snorted. "Anyway, if she's been kicking him in the nether regions like that since childhood, maybe that's why he sounds like he's got a woman's voice."

"Girl seiyuu, obviously," Kizuna waved. "Shows how sensitive he is."

"I still don't understand why she has to hurt him to show she likes him," Chiyo went on, skeptically.

"Well, this is why yuri is a better genre than harem," Remon grinned.

"Yuri?" Tamao asked sleepily. She was leaning back against Hazuki and had almost dozed off, and Hazuki could not help but grin at the word that had perked her up.

"Girls' love," Kizuna elaborated. "Sort of like, you know, this entire hill we live on?"

"Yeah, in yuri you don't have girls beating the cheese out of each other to show their love," Remon agreed.

"No, of course not," Hazuki laughed derisively. "In yuri, they just show their love by raping one another."

"They do not!" Kizuna and Remon said together, turning to look aghast at their senpai.

Hazuki raised an eyebrow. " *Kannazuki no Miko*," she said, flatly.

The Lulim juniors looked at one another, blinked, then frowned. "Okay, okay," Kizuna relented. "But the plot demanded it."

"It was for the greater good," Remon nodded firmly.

"If you say so," Hazuki smirked.

Seemingly oblivious to the rest of the conversation, Chiyo continued staring at the colorful images on the screen. "Does every girl in this show have such enormous breasts?"

"Standard for an ecchi," Kizuna said in a sage voice. "I'm pretty sure there's a token loli later in the series, though."

"But… this is set in a high school? That just doesn't seem… realistic." Chiyo cast what was probably supposed to be a surreptitious glance down at herself before turning haunted eyes back to the anime.

"Aww, Chiyo-chan, you've still got plenty of time," Remon giggled, hugging the younger girl.

"Yeah, *some* of us aren't done growing yet," Kizuna cackled, narrowing her eyes at the couple seated beside her. "Isn't that right… Tamao-senpai?"

"What?" Tamao asked, blinking away her latest near-miss with sleep.

"Come on, do you think no one's noticed the late growth spurt?" Kizuna smirked, then demonstrated exactly what she was talking about by reaching out and groping Tamao in a very particular spot, giving a "Honk!" noise as she did.

"Kizuna-chan!" Tamao yelped and tried to squirm away, but faster even than this, Hazuki's hand closed on Kizuna's wrist, squeezing just enough to make it clear that she could squeeze *a lot* harder if she so chose.

"Let's keep the ecchi on the screen, shall we?" Hazuki smiled frostily.

" *Hello, you've reached Azuma Hazuki. Please leave a message."*

Shizuma sighed. "Hazuki-chan, this is Shizuma. Please call me as soon as you get this message. It's… very important." She thought for a moment about trying to give details, but couldn't think of a way to adequately describe what was happening, so she finished with "Just… however late it is, call me back, please."

She hung up, took a deep breath, then went back out into the living room, where Kaori was still sitting. The ghost made flesh looked up at her and smiled wanly. "No answer?"

"No answer," Shizuma nodded, slowly re-taking her seat. "She's probably with Tamao-chan and Chikaru-chan."

At this, Kaori's smile looked somewhat more heartfelt. "So the Tamao-chan of this world has someone to take care of her, eh?"

"Two someones," Shizuma said, actually managing a roll of the eyes.

"And… from the story Eve and Lilith told me, they all have *Souma* ? Along with Kaname-san?"

"Apparently so. I'm not… entirely certain of the more fantastic elements. To be honest, I've tried not to think too hard about it."

"Tamao-chan was very dear to me," Kaori sighed. "She seemed very happy with… with Lilith, but after they left, she… well, she was lonely, and didn't seem to understand why she should be, and it was so hard not to be able to tell her."

Shizuma noted the way Kaori hesitated before saying the "real" name of one of her sisters, and wondered how much she was still trying to distance herself from them. "She's very happy here, with the two of them. You've met Hazuki, so you probably know how… *impressive* she can be, and if your world's Chikaru was even a little like ours, well… you get the idea."

The gentle smile faded then. "I'm afraid I don't, Shizuma-san. I've heard that name a few times now, but I don't remember ever knowing a Chikaru in my world."

"Minamoto Chikaru?" Shizuma blinked. "President of St. Lulim?"

"The president of St. Lulim when I left was Nakahara Sakiya," Kaori replied, shaking her head.

Shizuma frowned, but did not say anything more on the subject. She already felt like her brain was barely keeping up with the whole concept of alternate worlds and green-tinted magical powers, never mind dead lovers sitting in her living room. "I suppose things couldn't be identical," she said, feeling that she should say something neutral, if only to keep the conversation moving until Hazuki could return her call. "You'll like Chikaru, though. Of course, most *everyone* does, come to think of it."

She gradually trailed off, and when Kaori did not take up the conversation, Shizuma looked up at the girl and felt her heart leap. Now Kaori was the one pointedly looking away, and tears were beginning to fill those familiar eyes. "Kaori..?" she whispered.

"What have I done, Shizuma-san?" Kaori asked, her voice suddenly on the verge of sobs.

The tone was so unlike anything Shizuma had yet heard from the girl that it made her ache inside. Not even "her" Kaori, facing the reality of her death, had ever sounded so desolate as this. Shizuma found herself torn between wanting to comfort this girl, who in her vulnerability was suddenly that much more familiar, and wanting to run from the room, terrified of having to relive those final days. "Kaori…" she said again.

"I was just thinking of Tamao-chan, and how lonely she was, and… now I've done it to her as well." Kaori's haunted eyes, now unabashedly spilling tears, sought hers. "My God, Shizuma-san, when they were unweaving me from the story, I could… feel just how much that *meant* . Anyone I ever knew, any life that ever touched mine… my friends, my family… I felt every thread that connected me to them snapping one by one, while Lilith gathered up the frayed ends to remake the world without me in it. I just… I had no idea there would be so *many* of them, and… with every one of them that was broken, I felt…"

She trailed off, shaking her head, then paused to wipe her eyes before continuing, her voice low and shaky. "I don't have a world anymore, Shizuma-san. No one knows I ever existed. I'm… I'm a *fugitive.* My life *never happened*, except in my own memories, and… God help me, if I'd known then what I do now… even for Miyuki's sake, I… I don't know that I… that I could have…"

There were no more words, as Kaori's voice dissolved into incoherent weeping. Shizuma stared across the tea table at her, feeling her every muscle going taut, and her every thought whirling. She felt numbed and paralyzed by the impossibility of it all, and for a long moment, felt as though the world were stopping, as it had that day on the equestrian field at St. Spica.

Then, very slowly and deliberately, she did what she had to do.

She crossed the small space between them, knelt beside this girl who had the face of her long-gone love, and held her while she cried bitterly.

"I hope you're not too angry with Kizuna-chan."

Hazuki smiled at Tamao as they made their way cautiously though the dormitory halls (it was not yet past curfew, but close enough to be wary). "I'm not angry," she insisted, taking Tamao's hand and lacing their fingers. "Just fiercely territorial."

"I'm sure she meant no harm by it."

"Oh, I have no doubt about *that*," Hazuki chuckled. "But a fine samurai I'd be if I didn't take the opportunity to practice my death glare once in a while."

Tamao gave a quiet laugh in reply, then looked down at herself and blushed slightly. "At any rate, I didn't think anyone would have noticed."

" *I* noticed."

"Yes, but you're… um… closer to the subject than they are."

"Quite true. Hands-on experience, you could say."

"Do you think…" Tamao looked around for a moment before saying the next in just over a whisper. "Do you think the *Souma* might be… changing me? Did this happen to you?"

"Over the year I was looking for Hatsumi I gained two full cup sizes," Hazuki replied, giving the other girl a sardonic smile.

Tamao let out a small "meep," then glanced down at herself again, as though trying to picture this. "Why… why do you think that is?"

"Well… I used to think that since *Souma* is a force of creation, maybe it accentuates the… I don't know, the archetypal female in us. The whole fertility goddess thing."

"But that doesn't explain why we don't… I mean, why it slowed down our… you know."

"Yeah, that's where it all falls apart. So maybe Yamiyama was like most every male that's ever come after him, and just really liked big breasts."

"Silly," Tamao giggled as they came to a stop in front of her door and turned to face one another. Her face then darkened slightly. "I'm sorry if I was poor company tonight."

"I don't know if that's even *possible*," Hazuki smiled.

This made Tamao briefly smile in reply, but then she again took a thoughtful expression. "But honestly, everything feels… *off* tonight for some reason. It's like… oh, I don't know if I can describe it in words."

Hazuki brushed her fingers tenderly across the shorter girl's cheek. "Well, if you can't, no one can. But spending an evening watching ecchi anime with Remon and Kizuna is probably enough to make anyone feel a little off."

"You're probably right," Tamao nodded. "So… will you be at Chikaru's room later?"

This was an unexpectedly delicate question of late, as it was code for *Will tonight be chaste cuddling as three, or will the two of us be doing something else back at your room that involves more gasping?* As yet, this had not been a problem, but Hazuki couldn't help but wonder whether it might become one, and when.

"I imagine so," Hazuki nodded at last, "but you could always… visit me at mine first?"

Tamao smiled brilliantly at the suggestion, but only for a moment. "Let's just meet there," she suggested, and Hazuki could feel the conflict in her eyes and in their shared *Souma* . Not for a moment did she believe that Tamao did not want to *visit* her (and here she had to chuckle internally at her own use of silly euphemisms, even in her thoughts), but Tamao, like Hazuki herself, was still torn between the newfound physical aspect of their own relationship and the hard fact that the third of their circle was still not ready to make that leap.

Rather than dwell on this, though, Hazuki nodded and brought Tamao's hand up to kiss it. "I'll see you there, then."

The slightly troubled look on Tamao's face twisted into one of coy mischief. "And then… after the workout tomorrow, maybe you'd like to go out lingerie shopping with me? With all these changes, I may need some help with fittings, after all."

"Far be it for me to turn down a lady in need of help…"

Kaori cried well into the evening, clinging desperately to Shizuma as she shook with sobs. All the while, Shizuma patted her back, stroked her hair, and whispered assurances. Her own inner conflict could wait: someone she… alternate worlds and books be damned, someone she *loved* was in need.

Finally, once again spent of tears for the moment, Kaori made an effort to wipe her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Shizuma-san. This is probably difficult enough for you."

"It's okay," Shizuma lied, forcing the best smile she could.

"You were always so kind. Nagisa-chan's lucky to have you."

Shizuma wondered at first if Kaori might be referring once again to the world she'd left behind, but then the younger girl gave a fragile smile. "I was right, wasn't I? You're together in this world, too? I saw the look in your eyes when I got to that part of the story."

"Yes, yes we are," Shizuma nodded.

"That's good. I bet you swept her off her feet in the dining hall on her first day, just like I remember." The smile broke again. "I hope that still happened. I don't know that… that my not being there would have changed it, but…"

"You can't know," Shizuma said in what she hoped was a reassuring voice.

These words seemed to have exactly the opposite effect, however. "And that's the most frustrating part. Maybe I'll be able to ask Lilith later, but… did this make anything better? Who's to say that Miyuki didn't fall in love with someone else and do the same thing? And even if she lived, how happy will she be to have to marry Konno-san after all?"

Here, finally, was a place where Shizuma felt she had something to contribute to all this madness. "Well, again, I don't know how identical our worlds are, but… Konno-san is *gay* in this one, and Miyuki is the happiest I've ever seen her, even in this marriage she'd been dreading for so long."

Kaori's eyes lit up. "She is? And - *he* is?"

Shizuma nodded. "In getting married, they were able to set each other free. Maybe your Miyuki will be the same."

"That would be wonderful," Kaori sighed, looking distantly hopeful. "I hope she can have a long and happy life. Then at least *some* good could come of this."

"A long and happy life," Shizuma agreed, all too aware of the irony of hearing Kaori say those words.

"I wonder now if I should have stood by my original convictions," Kaori went on, her voice darkening. "Maybe… maybe I should have

insisted that they just let me die like I was supposed to rather than completely remove me."

"Don't say that," Shizuma whispered, her voice cracking with emotion to the point that she had to clear her throat twice before daring to go on. "Don't say that you were supposed to die. I… won't accept that. There's nothing 'supposed to' about a life cut short like yours was. It was… it was tragic, and wrong, and unfair, and…"

"But in this world, where I died, Miyuki is happy now," Kaori said softly. "Maybe it would have been the same in mine."

Throughout the entirety of this surreal encounter, even as she'd held the sobbing girl to her, Shizuma had managed to hold in her own tears, because she knew that once she let them go, it would be all over. But at this stark reminder that the Kaori in her arms was truly not the girl she'd loved, those tears were suddenly on the verge of breaking free. Even as she'd tried all along to remind herself that this was not her Kaori, the simple truth that her visitor knew nothing about their history was, at that moment, more than Shizuma could bear.

Kaori, oblivious to her host's turmoil, chewed her lower lip for a moment before she went on. "Was it hard for her when I died? Or… did we even fall in love in this world, with me being sick?"

"It was… hard for her, yes," Shizuma managed. "But… no, in this world you weren't… with *her* in that way… There was… another…" She could not bring herself to say it.

Kaori arched her eyebrows at the implication that there had been someone else. "Shizuma-san," she whispered, "who… who was I in love with here?"

The first tears finally came, then, and even through her blurred vision, Shizuma saw Kaori go pale as a sheet. "Oh, God," her guest whispered.

"You… you couldn't have known," Shizuma managed around the lump in her throat.

"Shizuma, I…" she started, reaching gingerly toward the other girl's face for a moment before she stopped short. "I'm so sorry. Damn it, I…"

"You couldn't have known," Shizuma repeated.

"No, I think I could have," Kaori countered, and Shizuma was shocked to hear anger in that voice. Kaori stood suddenly and glared toward the top of Shizuma's bookcase, where Ken-chan had been resting all this time. "Why the *hell* didn't you warn me? Have you been *enjoying* this, watching me twist the knife without even knowing it?"

"On the contrary, sister," Ken-chan piped up, "I have not been enjoying this at all, but I did not feel it was my place to tell you."

"That's a bunch of crap! Whose idea was it to drop me in the living room of the one person I'd end up hurting the most? Do you immortals get off on this sort of thing?"

"We had no choice in this case," Ken-chan insisted. "We could not take you to Astr…"

"To *hell* with Astraea Hill!" Kaori raged. "You could have taken me anywhere! Why here?"

Shizuma held out a hand toward the furious girl. "Kaori, don't. He's right. This was… this was the best choice. I knew about your story, and… I can put you in touch with Hazuki and the others."

"You shouldn't have had to go through this," Kaori said wretchedly. "Maybe I should just go back to the library."

"As it happens, we cannot go back to the Great Library," Ken-chan reminded her. "Not while Lady Eve has the place on lockdown. Until

the potential danger passes, we're stuck here."

"Then take me somewhere on this world where I don't have to hurt anyone else!" Kaori exploded.

As difficult as the past moments had been, the sight of such fury on that beloved face was more painful still. "Kaori, stop!" Shizuma shouted. "You're not going anywhere. Naoko-sama entrusted you to me, and… I'll take care of you."

"But you shouldn't have to…"

"I *want* to," Shizuma insisted. "We'll… we'll go to my family's vacation house near the school, and we'll have the others come and meet us there. Then you can stay there as long as you need to while… while they do whatever they need to do at the library." She swallowed hard at the thought of taking Kaori to the very place where Shizuma had first made love with her counterpart, but there seemed little choice.

"But… Shizuma, I've hurt you enough just by being here. I don't want to cause you any more pain than I already have."

Shizuma rose unsteadily to her feet to stand beside Kaori, and reached out to lay her hands on her ghost's shoulders. "Then… don't leave."

After returning to her room in the Spica wing of the dormitory, Hazuki flomped down onto her bed and sighed expressively, caught somewhere between a very real disappointment and an equally real guilt for *feeling* disappointed. No one had promised them that the threesome solution was always going to be an easy one.

Rather than think about that, then, she flashed back briefly on Tamao's observation that something felt off this evening. Truth be told, Hazuki had also felt mildly out of sorts for a while, but she had attributed this to the strangeness of watching *Girls Bravo* (of all things) with the Lulim girls and poor Chiyo. Now that she was alone,

though, she felt an odd, almost nagging sensation somewhere inside. It was as though she was supposed to be remembering something, but for the life of her could not place it.

At that moment, there was a knock at her door, so she hoisted herself out of bed to answer. That it was Chikaru came as no surprise. The troubled expression on the Lulim president's face, however, was something else again.

"Do you feel it too, Hazuki-chan?" Chikaru asked without preamble.

Shizuma again closed her bedroom door behind her, and dazedly seated herself at the foot of her bed. She stared fixedly at the phone in her hand for a few moments, then flipped it open and poised her thumb over the keypad.

She knew she should try calling Hazuki again, now that Kaori had been talked into staying. The sooner they could all meet at the relatively neutral ground of the vacation house, the better for all of them it would likely be.

However, even mindful of this, she found herself calling a completely different number. She was distantly aware that she was probably about to break some kind of cosmic law, and at the very least was certainly going to break Naoko-sama's trust, but she couldn't bring herself to care at this point.

The phone rang twice, followed by a voice that was equal parts sleepy and concerned. "Shizuma?"

"Miyuki…" she whispered, brokenly.

"Shizuma, what's wrong?" Miyuki asked her, now sounding wide awake.

She wanted to tell Miyuki a great many things at that moment: how sorry she was for having been such a terrible friend in the time

leading up to the wedding, how grateful she was that she could hear that voice considering what might have happened, how scared she was at the idea that had things gone just a little differently, this world might not have a Miyuki in it any longer…

"Shizuma, what is it?" Miyuki insisted. "Are you hurt? Has something happened to Nagisa?"

Confronted with this very real concern, however, Shizuma could say none of those things, and the breakdown she'd been fighting since Kaori's arrival finally began in earnest. "Miyuki… I… please, Miyuki, I just… I need you…"

"I'm here, Shizuma. I'm here."

Next: Fugitive

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In before Armageddon! Woot! (Not that I expect to be going anywhere tomorrow, mind you. I think the average Rapture-believers would be a bit peeved at having to share the boat to Heaven with a writer of yuri fanfic…)

AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER: I do not own *Girls Bravo*, and yes, that scene was another excuse to make obscure inside jokes. But at least it finally gave me a chance to give Chiyo some dialogue…

Fugitive

I'm harboring a fugitive, a defector of a kind

And she lives in my soul, and drinks of my wine

And I'd give my last breath to keep us alive

-Indigo Girls

Part 8: Fugitive

The Hanazono family vacation house was a place that held many memories for Miyuki, and certainly not all of them were good ones. After pulling around to park next to Shizuma's Miata convertible, she paused a moment to look up at the villa, letting out a soft sigh and briefly wondering what exactly she'd just gotten herself into.

In all honesty, she had tried not to think much about it as she'd made the drive from Kyoto. This was obviously something she was going to have to play by ear, and it would be best not to enter into it with any firm expectations. Squaring her shoulders both literally and figuratively, Miyuki stopped pondering and approached the front doors. Pausing only long enough to take one last deep breath, she rang the bell.

Moments later, an exhausted-looking Shizuma opened the door for her, and Miyuki had no sooner stepped into the foyer than she found herself being tightly embraced by her old friend. Miyuki returned the hug, and for a long time they stood there, not saying a word. To her disquiet, Miyuki noticed that Shizuma was trembling just slightly, though whether it was emotion or sleeplessness, she could not tell.

"I'm here," Miyuki said at last.

"Thank you for that," Shizuma whispered. They broke, but Shizuma kept one of Miyuki's hands in hers. "Come on. There's someone here who's looking forward to meeting you."

"So you've said," Miyuki replied, trying to keep her tone neutral. Now was not the time to let even a hint of doubt show.

Still hand in hand, Shizuma led her to the living room, where a dark haired young woman was seated at one of the sofas. Upon hearing them enter, she stood and quickly bowed, her face creased with anxiety and her eyes wide with something that looked a lot like hope. "Roku- I mean, Konno-sama - I'm… so pleased to meet you."

Miyuki stared into Kaori's eyes for a few seconds, feeling several emotions wash over her as she took in every detail of the familiar face. Strongest amongst them, though, was relief.

So it was all true after all.

Miyuki had certainly *wanted* to believe everything she'd been told the night before, particularly since Shizuma had invoked Naoko-sama in her story, and Miyuki had always felt that there was something not quite earthly about that girl. But Miyuki liked to consider herself a logical, pragmatic person, and even as she'd given assurances to her nearly hysterical friend over the phone, part of her had wondered if this trip would wind up being some sort of intervention: was Shizuma undergoing a mental breakdown? Would it fall to Miyuki to find help for a dear friend who had somehow become unhinged so soon after finally finding happiness in her life?

Only at that moment, in the presence of the impossible, did Miyuki realize just how frightened she had been for Shizuma. And in that same moment, to her amusement, Miyuki also realized that the whole concept of other worlds and angelic guardians and a select few humans holding small shards of the power of creation inside themselves… well, that was a lot better than the alternative, really. She'd rather have all of that than a broken Shizuma.

Kaori said nothing more, and Miyuki saw that the younger girl was trying very hard not to stare at Miyuki's hair. Somehow, this amused her even more. "Well, well, Kaori-chan," Miyuki said with a brisk sigh. "I must say, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Thank you, Konno-sama," Kaori bowed again, looking flustered. "I'm sorry, though… I'm not the-"

"You're not the Kaori-chan I knew," Miyuki nodded, giving her a lopsided smile. "Yes, Shizuma-chan told me all about it."

" *All* about it?" Kaori repeated, her eyes jumping between Miyuki and Shizuma nervously.

"I'm sorry, Kaori-chan," Shizuma began, "but I had to-"

"No apologies," Miyuki interrupted. "So, Kaori-chan, you're no doubt aware that *I'm* not the Miyuki *you* knew either."

"I know," Kaori replied quickly, her gaze dropping to the floor.

"That being said, I must say I'm not at all comfortable with the idea of you continuing to call me Konno-sama. Parallel worlds aside, I think you know me well enough to call me Miyuki."

Kaori looked up at Miyuki, her eyes shining. "Um… Miyuki-san… how much… *exactly*… did Shizuma-san tell you?"

"Enough to know that your last memory of me was not a happy one," Miyuki said gently. "And even though it wasn't *technically* me… I'm so sorry you had to endure that pain, Kaori-chan."

By this time, Kaori looked very much like she was having a difficult time restraining herself, so Miyuki went on. "And even though it wasn't *technically* me, there's obviously something you need to do right now, so… please do."

With a single sob, Kaori launched herself across the living room and into the older girl's arms. Miyuki held Kaori tightly against her, and for

a moment found herself marveling at how *real* she was. As painful and confusing as it might be, this was a miracle for both of them, she realized. How many people get the chance to hold someone they'd thought lost forever?

She glanced over at Shizuma, who looked haggard and drawn, like someone sick with a fever, but the silver-haired girl had the traces of a smile as she watched Kaori weep against Miyuki's shoulder.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and Shizuma checked her watch. "I sent a driver to pick up the others at the school," she explained, somewhat absently.

"Ah, so you were able to reach them after all?" Miyuki asked.

"Not long after I spoke to you. I'll be right back."

As Shizuma departed to answer the door, Kaori stepped back and made a visible effort to compose herself. "I'm sorry, Miyuki-san," she smiled, wiping her eyes.

"No apologies," Miyuki said again.

"Right, no apologies… Thank you, Miyuki-san. I… just can't tell you how happy I am to see you, even if…"

"You don't have to explain," Miyuki assured her. "And it's mutual, Kaori-chan. Even if."

At this point Shizuma returned with no fewer than six additional guests, and Miyuki raised her eyebrows in mild surprise as she gazed at the small crowd. She had expected Chikaru, Tamao and Hazuki, of course, based on what she had been told by Shizuma (not to mention what she was now more certain than ever she had seen during their trip to the onsen at Miyazu - funny how much sense that made now). The presence of Kenjō Kaname was a bit of a shock, even though her name had come up once or twice in the deluge of explanation the night before. She had no idea what would have

brought Shizuma to invite Konohana Hikari, however, and as for the last girl in the group…

Shizuma, trying to play the proper hostess in the face of it all, was busily introducing each of them to Kaori. First were Hazuki and Kaname, whom Kaori appeared to have met before (and whom she looked a little relieved to see, if Miyuki were any judge). Next was Chikaru, who was gentle smiles and soothing words as always, followed by Tamao, at whose presence Kaori brightened considerably. Shizuma introduced Hikari next, and the young Etoile bowed deeply, saying how grateful she was to finally have the chance to meet her.

Last of all came Nagisa, and Miyuki held her breath throughout the introductions, in which Kaori smiled almost apologetically, telling the red-haired girl how glad she was to see her again, even though she knew that for this Nagisa, it would be the first time. Nagisa, to her credit, smiled politely and even warmly, but her face was ashen, and beneath the pleasantries Miyuki had the distinct feeling that the poor girl might throw up at any moment. In spite of everything else that was happening, she found herself once again irritated with Shizuma; had it really been necessary to bring Nagisa into this?

It was then, however, that Shizuma took Nagisa's hand in hers, and bowed to the room. "If you would please excuse us," she said quietly, "there's something Nagisa and I need to talk about in private."

"Of course, Shizuma-san," Kaori nodded, looking very much like she understood, and Miyuki felt her irritation fade away. Perhaps Shizuma knew what she was doing after all.

Once the two had departed the living room, the remaining guests settled themselves variously. Kaori looked for a moment like she wanted to stay close to Miyuki, but instead took Tamao's hand and sat beside her on the sofa which she'd occupied originally, while Hazuki, Chikaru and Hikari took the opposite couch and Miyuki

seated herself in an ornate armchair. Kaname remained standing, looking slightly uncomfortable.

For a long time, no one said anything. Miyuki took a look around the room, and was amused to see that she had somehow managed to once again situate herself at the head of the table, as it were. "Well," she said, taking charge of the meeting once again, "with our hostess otherwise occupied… Kaori-chan, perhaps you could do us the favor of telling us the whole story?"

Without even having intended it, Shizuma found that she had led Nagisa back to that room again: the one that had been Kaori's, so long ago. *Just the right room to have this kind of talk*, she remembered.

Nagisa stood at the window, hugging her arms to her chest as she looked out at the ocean. How many times were they going to have to go through this? Would Shizuma's past continue to come between them, every time it seemed that they had finally made peace with it?

Realizing that it was up to her to break the silence, Shizuma took a shaky breath and did so. "Nagisa… this thing that you're thinking? Don't. Please, love… don't."

"I'm not sure *what* to think," Nagisa said quietly. "This is… this is too much for me, Shizuma. I know I'm not the brightest girl in the world, but… I just can't wrap my mind around this."

Shizuma felt her heart crumple at these words. Was Nagisa going to give up, after everything they'd been through? "Nagisa," she said, tremulously.

But then, Nagisa turned to face her, and Shizuma was shocked to see the look on the younger girl's face. Nagisa's jaw was set, and her eyes were piercing, even as tears threatened to fall. "Am I going to have to fight for you, Shizuma?" she asked. "Because I will, you know. Even if it's hopeless, I'll fight for you."

Shizuma nodded, feeling an unexpected smile cross her face. "If I remember it correctly, you were willing to fight a *dragon* for me, once."

Nagisa rolled her eyes at that, forcing a smile of her own. "I was trying not to faint," she admitted.

"Still, you stood in front of me, with nothing more than a practice naginata to defend us. I don't know that I've ever told you how proud I was of you, and the strength you showed."

The smile faded, and Nagisa looked away as the first tears fell. "Do you remember when we were at the hot spring, and I asked if you wanted to…" She paused to swallow hard, just as she had then. "If you wanted to share with Miyuki-sama? If it would make you happy to have us both?"

"I remember," Shizuma nodded.

"You told me that you didn't need more than you have with me."

"That's still true, Nagisa…"

Nagisa continued as though she had not heard. "And when you said that, I was so… *relieved*, and I realized that sharing you would have *killed* me. I… I don't know how Tamao-chan does it, honestly. I asked you that then because I thought I *was* strong… at least, enough to let you *have* that if it was something you really wanted, but… I wasn't that strong at all…"

"Nagisa…"

"And now… oh, God, Shizuma, I thought I'd lose you to her when she was only a *memory*, and now… I don't know how, but I'll… I'll find a way. I may not be strong, but I'll find a way to fight for you…"

Shizuma could stand it no longer, and stepped forward to wrap her arms around the girl. "Nagisa, you don't *need* to fight for me. I'm still

yours. Kaori is…"

"Not the same Kaori-san," Nagisa nodded against her. "I know. Chikaru-sama told me. But she's…"

"But *nothing*," Shizuma insisted. "Nagisa, I need to tell you something, and more than ever I need you to listen, and to believe me."

Nagisa took a shuddering breath, but said nothing, so Shizuma continued. "I drove all night to get here, and while I was driving, I remembered something. That day I was just talking about? With the dragon, and Naoko-sama, and everything else that happened? Do you remember?"

"I could never forget it," Nagisa whispered.

"Neither could I. Something happened that day, Nagisa, that I don't think I've ever told you. After the others… disappeared, and the world was coming apart around us, I was terrified. I was *certain* that we were going to die, and I thought of all the things I hadn't done, and all the things I'd left unsaid. I thought of how unfair it all was, and how many regrets I still had, and… then, through all the chaos, I heard something."

"What was it?" Nagisa asked quietly.

Shizuma smiled at the memory. "Your voice. You were saying a prayer. And at that moment, I knew that none of the rest mattered. Even with the world coming to an end, I had you beside me, and that was all I needed. As long as I could hold you and tell you I love you, I could face the end. All the fear and regret was gone, and I was content just to be with you for those last moments, because you're *everything* to me."

"Shizuma…"

"That's why I need you to believe me now, Nagisa. The Kaori in this house may not be the one I once loved, but that doesn't matter, because even if it *was* her, back from the dead somehow… I'd *never* leave you, my love. Not for her, not for Miyuki… not for *anyone* . *Aishiteru yo*… my Nagisa…"

She wanted to emphasize the words with a kiss, but Nagisa beat her to it. Soon they were sinking to the neatly made guest bed together, Nagisa kissing her fiercely as Shizuma held her tighter still. The anxious blur of the past night melted away, and just as she had at the end of the world, Shizuma once again found herself at peace.

"After that, there isn't much to tell," Kaori finished. "Shizuma-san brought us here, and… here we all are."

Tamao squeezed Kaori's hand, trying to do like Chikaru always did and allow her *Souma* to flow reassuringly through the connection. It was obvious, from her story, that Kaori was in no end of turmoil, amidst these familiar faces of the loved ones she'd lost, but she seemed content to hold the hand of the one who looked like her best friend, and Tamao was happy to provide what support she could.

"What happened to Ken-chan, anyway?" Hazuki asked at length. "With this many girls in one room, I'm surprised he's not sitting on the coffee table drooling."

"I haven't seen him since we arrived," Kaori said. "He didn't seem to enjoy traveling by car, and he flew off as soon as we parked."

"I'm sure he's got his eye on whatever Shizuma and Nagisa are doing," Kaname snorted.

Tamao frowned, finding that she did not want to think too much about what their absent friends might be up to. She hoped it was something other than crying, at any rate.

"That's an amazing story, Kaori-san," Hikari said next. "Even having heard about it before, from Naoko-sama, it's still so incredible to think there's another world so much like our own."

"Well, *almost* like your own," Kaori sighed, giving Chikaru and Hazuki a tiny frown. "I knew everyone else in this room, but somehow my world didn't have either of you in it."

"That's not surprising," Chikaru smiled wryly. "If I were to guess, I'd say that the Minamoto Chikaru of your world died young."

The room fell silent, save for Tamao's tiny gasp. By the softening look on her face, though, Chikaru was untroubled by the potential implications. "It would certainly fit in with Eve's idiom," she shrugged. "She does seem to have a habit of saving the lives of those destined to leave the world early." She turned to Hazuki, who had taken her hand and given it a soft squeeze. "And as for Hazuki-chan, I suspect that this girl beside me is unique in all the worlds, so again, no surprise."

Miyuki was peering intently at their latest otherworldly guest, and Tamao found herself again wondering at her former class president's presence. Obviously she was in on the secret now, and for all the impossibility being discussed around her, she seemed to be taking it very much in stride. Just like always. "Well, Kaori-chan, this does leave us with a very important question that remains unanswered. Where will you go from here?"

Kaori looked down, as she often had when Miyuki had spoken thus far. "I don't know that I can go *anywhere*," she said softly. "I don't have a world of my own anymore. Maybe I'll have to stay in the library from now on."

"I don't think you could," Kaname said with a shake of her head. "Lilith told me something about it being against the rules, at least on any kind of permanent basis."

"That's true," Hazuki considered. "I guess we'll just need to find you another world to live in."

"A- another world?" Kaori repeated.

"Why not this one?" Tamao suggested, even though she could immediately think of any number of reasons why it could not work.

Chikaru and Miyuki exchanged uncomfortable glances. "That would probably be… difficult," Chikaru said delicately, "if only because it's been years now since our Kaori-chan left us. To have you re-appear now, alive and healthy, would be… interesting, to say the least."

"We could say her death was faked?" Hazuki mused.

Miyuki arched an eyebrow at the other girl. "Have you ever been to a traditional funeral, Hazuki-chan?"

"I… can't say that I have."

"Then you don't know how impossible that would be," Miyuki nodded. "I, on the other hand, have been to my share… including hers. Between the wake, the funeral, and the cremation, not to mention what comes *after* the cremation, you're not going to find anyone in the Sakuragi family who would believe she's not dead, even with her standing in front of them."

Tamao winced at the thought of this. If they had done everything according to tradition, her family would have been with her as her body was placed within the cremation chamber, and then afterward participated in the ceremonial removal of bones from the ashes. Still, to be talking about this with Kaori sitting right there seemed a bit much, and Tamao squeezed the girl's hand a little more tightly. Kaori's *Souma*, which had been faint to the touch already, seemed to be retreating further as the conversation went on.

"Well, then," Hazuki sighed, "short of having her assume a new identity and hope that no one ever checks her fingerprints or her

DNA, the only thing I can think of is for us to find another world where she was going to die young, and have her take the place of that Kaori-san at the moment of death." Here, she shot a sidelong smirk at Kaname. "A miracle cure, you could say."

Kaori's face shot upward at this, and she gave Hazuki a hard look that made Tamao very nervous. "Hazuki-san, with all due respect, that's the most obscene thing I've ever heard."

Hazuki bristled visibly. "Oh, really?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know that I've made myself clear," Kaori said with a frustrated sigh. "I can't *go* to any other world. I shouldn't even be in *this* one right now! I *felt* the damage done when I left my own world, and now you think I should force myself into another one? Just the thought of what that would do to that world… it makes my skin crawl. It could never work."

"I don't know," Hazuki said in a low voice, and now Tamao was starting to get very nervous indeed. "It's worked out pretty damned well for me so far."

"You… you're not from this world?" Kaori gasped.

"Not originally, no," Hazuki frowned. "The Azuma Hazuki of this world committed suicide after spending her sixteenth birthday alone. I woke up in her place."

Tamao noticed the look of shock on Hikari's face, but more surprising to Tamao herself was the identical expression on Kaname's. Even though they knew, through Naoko-sama, that Hazuki was not native to their book, apparently neither of them had ever learned *that* particular detail.

Kaori worked her jaw for a few moments before she continued, speaking in a clipped voice. "And you're… okay with that?"

"More than okay. I'm truly happy for the first time in my life… or hers, for that matter. I finally have a life that feels meaningful."

"How nice for you," Kaori nodded. "I'll have to correct myself, Hazuki-san. Along with being obscene, that has to be the most *selfish* thing I've ever heard in my life."

The temperature in the room dropped about twenty degrees, and Hazuki's voice went similarly frosty. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"Is that all that matters to you?" Kaori shouted, releasing Tamao's hand as she rose to her feet. "Are you so blinded by your own wishes that you're willing to sacrifice this whole world's destiny just for *your* happiness?"

Hazuki stood as well, her eyes shooting daggers. "Well, if you ask me, I think the universe owes me a few favors! I think I've *earned* the right to some happiness, thank you!"

"This world was meant to go on without you! You're changing *everything* by staying here!"

"Is that so? Well, guess what? I don't *care!* "

Before Kaori could speak again, Chikaru's voice cut through the argument, even though she had not raised it one whit. "Hazuki-chan… I'm sorry, but I need you to leave the room, please."

Hazuki turned shocked, hurt eyes on Chikaru. There was a long pause, in which the two stared one another down, and then without another word, Hazuki straightened up and stalked off. Chikaru let out a long sigh as she watched her go, crossing her arms pensively over her chest as she did.

Kaori, by this time, had taken a few deep breaths, but her voice was still rough with her recent anger. "Thank you, Chikaru-san. I'm sure that wasn't easy for you."

"Oh, don't thank me," Chikaru replied, and her voice was that of the Shadow Empress of Astraea, not Tamao's beloved friend. "You see, I'm inclined to agree with her, but arguing won't get us anywhere, and asking *you* to leave would be counterproductive in finding a solution for you, don't you agree?"

"None of you understand," Kaori sighed, shaking her head. "It's my fault. I wish I could describe it better, but…" Her face took on a haunted look. "I never put much thought into the idea of how much difference a single person can make in a world of billions. I never thought of myself as being of any great importance, even as Etoile. Then, after seeing the library, and realizing that I wasn't just one person in billions, but that my entire world was just a single book amongst endless shelves? Trust me, I had no illusions about my importance. But then… when Lilith started removing me from the world… just pulling that one thread… I was horrified. Just removing one little person like me caused damage that I could scarcely conceive, and yet I got to feel it all, to every last detail. It was like…"

"A butterfly effect?" Kaname said suddenly.

"Butterfly effect?" Hikari asked, looking puzzled at this term.

"You know, chaos theory," Kaname went on. "A butterfly flaps its wings in the tropics, and the tiny change to the atmosphere creates a hurricane halfway around the world? Or there was that science fiction story, where the time traveler stepped on a butterfly while visiting the past, and came back to find his present completely altered?"

There was a long pause, as everyone in the room stared at Kaname. "Hey, I *read*, you know," she said defensively.

"But that's exactly it," Kaori nodded. "And that's why I can't go to another world. I can feel *this* world changing just because I'm here, having this talk with all of you. It works both ways: adding me to a world would be just as damaging as removing me was. I could send

destiny spinning out of control just by being there, even if I tried to live a quiet life."

"Then what do you intend to do?" Chikaru asked, her face unreadable.

Kaori took a deep breath, clenched her jaw for a moment, then nodded. "There's only one thing I *can* do," she said in a thick voice. "It's what I should have done all along. I shouldn't even exist right now, and the only way to keep me from doing any more damage is… to cease to be." She nodded again. "I'll just have to…"

There was a blur of motion, and then someone slapped Kaori hard.

The dark-haired visitor's hand went to her face, gingerly touching the spot where she had been struck, as she and everyone else in the room stared wide-eyed at the one who had delivered the blow.

"I'm so sorry, Sakuragi-san," Hikari said in a quiet voice, punctuating the apology with a deep bow. "But at the same time… I couldn't listen to you say those things any longer."

Tamao looked around the room, seeing her surprise mirrored on every other face (except Kaname's: she instead looked rather impressed). Kaori's lips worked soundlessly for a few moments, but Hikari was not finished speaking.

"I don't know much about the library, and I don't have this *Souma* of yours, but I've always believed life to be sacred, and… yours has literally been touched by *angels* . And… forgive me for saying so, but I won't stand for you calling Hazuki-san selfish when you're willing to talk about ending your own life in a house full of people who've already had to mourn you once before."

Silence reigned for a long while, but at last, Kaori sank back to the couch, still appearing to be in shock. Tamao took her hand, this time with both of her own. "Kaori-chan, you said that Lilith-sama called you one of hers. That means my *Souma* is like yours: we're both

Makers, like she is. I can't tell you that I've ever experienced anything like what you described, but I've seen the other side of it. I helped *heal* your world after the dragons came."

"That was you?" Kaori whispered, looking up at her.

"You remember?"

Kaori nodded slowly, and her eyes grew even more distant. "When the biggest dragon was coming through that hole in the sky… the pain was blinding. I've never felt anything like it, before or since. But then it started to ease, and there was… something familiar. It felt like an old friend was putting a cold cloth on my face, to help make the fever go away."

"It was an honor to be able to help," Tamao smiled. "I had the chance to assist Lilith-sama with sealing an even more damaged world later, and… from doing that, I got the feeling that for all their fragility, the books are a lot more adaptable to change than you might think."

"Don't you feel it?" Kaori asked in a tiny, desolate voice. "Don't you feel the change that my presence is making?"

Tamao exchanged glances with Chikaru, then nodded. This much, truly, she could not deny. "I think I do. I think we all felt it when you arrived last night."

"So it's true, then! I *am* changing things, just by being here!"

"But change doesn't have to be *bad*," Tamao insisted. She searched her mind for a proper metaphor, then smiled as it came to her. "I think there's a good reason why the worlds are books: they're *stories*, every one of them, with the futures still unwritten. And haven't you ever been writing a story, where you had the whole thing mapped out in your head, and you knew exactly where it was going to go… but then midway through you thought of something you wanted to add, and even if it wasn't what you had originally intended, and even if it took things in a direction they weren't 'meant' to go, in

the end it made the story that much better? Maybe you *will* alter the destiny of one of the books, Kaori-chan, but there's no saying you won't alter it for the *better* ."

Kaori stared at Tamao for a long while, then looked down and rubbed both hands over her face. "This is… this is too much. I can't even think anymore."

"I think perhaps it's time we took a break, all of us," Miyuki spoke up then. "Let's all clear our heads a little before we go changing the world… whichever world it ends up being."

Without another word, Kaori stood and walked out of the living room. Tamao was about to follow, but Chikaru's voice brought her short. "Tamao-chan, would you mind terribly checking on Hazuki-chan? I'd like a chance to talk to Kaori-chan alone."

Even as the others drifted off, Hikari remained seated on the sofa, her mind buzzing with the day's revelations. She couldn't pretend to understand it all, of course, but for now she was willing to trust Chikaru to take care of poor Kaori. How strange it was to think that even angels could make mistakes in the name of doing good.

While she had the feeling that such an idea should bother her, to her partial surprise she found it oddly comforting.

Her thoughts were then interrupted as someone sat down beside her, and when she looked over, Hikari found herself face to face with Kaname, who was giving her a mischievous little smile. "So, Etoile-sama," the older girl drawled, "when exactly did you grow those fangs, hmm?"

"What do you mean, Kaname-san?"

"What do you *think* I mean? That slap was a thing of *beauty* . There wasn't anything girly or waifish *about* it. When did you pick up *that* particular skill, hmm?"

"Well, Kaname-san," Hikari replied, "let's just say that there came a time when I realized I might need to protect myself." She then smiled at the older girl, giving her just a hint of malice, and finding that she kind of enjoyed it. "So I suppose I have *you* to thank for this."

She stood up, smoothed her skirt, and left without another word. Behind her, she heard Kaname give a snort of laughter. "Okay, I'll accept that…"

To her surprise, Tamao found Hazuki in the kitchen chopping vegetables and monitoring several pots on the stove. "Hazuki-chan?" she called.

Hazuki looked over and gave Tamao a smile that seemed only slightly more genuine than forced. "I don't have a sword with me for practice," she said with a shrug, "so I figured I'd calm down the old fashioned way. This place is surprisingly well stocked for a vacation home. I wouldn't have expected so many fresh ingredients in the pantry."

Nodding slowly, Tamao leaned against a nearby counter-top, not wanting to crowd her work but at the same time wanting to be as close as she could. For a while, she simply watched Hazuki bustle expertly about. "You look like you've had a lot of practice at this," she noted.

"Well, with constantly absent parents, no household servants and Hatsumi being endearingly hopeless in the kitchen, there wasn't a lot of choice, really. But I like cooking: it's something I've always been proud of." She shot Tamao another wry smile. "So maybe under the sword-wielding schoolgirl lesbian exterior, there's a traditional Japanese housewife struggling to get out after all."

"Somehow I doubt that," Tamao chuckled.

"Yeah, me too. Anyway, with Shizuma-sama notably absent, someone needs to play hostess, so after I suddenly found myself

with nothing else to do, I nominated myself."

There was a touch of bitterness in her voice, and Tamao sighed. "Are you angry with Chikaru?"

"No," Hazuki said immediately, but then paused for a moment. "Okay, a little. But more than anything, I'm just annoyed that she was right. I wasn't helping. If anything, I was just proving Kaori-san's point about ruining everything."

"I think she's wrong, Hazuki-chan," Tamao said then, because it had to be said. "I don't think you're hurting this world at all."

"You're also biased," Hazuki smiled ruefully.

"That's as may be, but do you really think Lilith-sama would have let you come back here if you were going to… what was it, spin destiny out of control?"

Hazuki placed her palms flat on the counter and took a long, slow breath. "You know… I love Lilith, I really do. Not the way she wanted me to, but she grew on me. After everything I've seen, though, I'm not sure that I'm willing to use her judgment as a benchmark yet, even if she *has* changed. I wish I could ask Aaya more about how I chose this world. It didn't seem to bother him, and… I think he would have told me if my being here was a problem."

She emptied the contents of her cutting board into one of the pots, then stirred another. Tamao watched her for a while, wondering whether or not she should ask her next question, but it had been eating at her since hearing Kaori's tale. "Hazuki-chan… what happened at the Universal Garden?"

Hazuki froze. "What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"When Kaori-chan was telling her story, she said that Lilith-sama reminded Eve-sama about something that happened in the Universal Garden, and… when she got to that part, you went pale. I don't know

where or what this Universal Garden even is, but… were you there when whatever it was happened?"

"Yes," Hazuki said, not looking up from the stove. "I was there."

"What happened, Hazuki-chan?"

"Something I never wanted to speak of again. Something I've never even told Chikaru, though I think she already knows about it. She showed me a sketchbook once, where she'd drawn some things she'd seen in a dream about me, and… some of the pictures were of that garden. She's never asked for details, but… I think she knows."

Tamao had never seen Hazuki this guarded, even when she had first talked about the scars on her leg, and she realized that for all of the sharing of souls that happened on a daily basis, Hazuki still had secrets hidden away. "You don't… have to tell me," she said, though it hurt to do so.

For a long time the only sound was the bubbling of liquid in the pots, but then Hazuki turned to Tamao and crossed her arms over her chest. "The Universal Garden is a place that exists outside of the Great Library," she said at last, still not meeting Tamao's eyes. "A powerful kitsune spirit lives there, and that was where Lilith and I finally caught up with Eve. I'm… not sure of how it all happened, but after she first appeared to us as Eve and reclaimed the hat… I chased her down the garden paths and eventually found her as Hatsumi again. I ran away with her, looking for a way out. I didn't care which world we might end up in at that point, because I'd finally found Hatsumi, and everything would be perfect, as long as I had her again."

Hazuki's voice became more and more constricted as she told the story, and Tamao felt her own throat tighten in sympathy.

"Then… everything went wrong. She told me that she couldn't come home with me, because she had to return to her true self, and her duty. She showed me her true form, and… I couldn't even touch her

without her *Souma* throwing me to the floor. I asked her one last time to come home with me, and… she called it a dream that could never come true."

"What happened then?" Tamao asked, seeing that Hazuki was more reluctant than ever to continue.

"I snapped," Hazuki whispered. "I realized with cold, perfect clarity, that I didn't want to live without her."

"Did you… did you try to kill yourself, Hazuki-chan?" Tamao asked, hating the words even as she said them.

Hazuki shook her head, and for the first time since beginning her story she looked up to meet Tamao's eyes. "No, Tamao-chan. I tried to kill *her* ."

Tamao shuddered at the cold tone of Hazuki's voice, but forced herself to continue meeting the other girl's eyes. "How..?"

"I told her that if we couldn't be together, I'd kill her first, and then myself. And at that point, after a year of chasing her, after all the fighting and killing I'd done… somehow, that made *sense* to me. She… looked at me sadly, then changed herself back to Hatsumi, and told me to do as I wished. So… I put my hands around her throat, and I…"

At this point it was Hazuki who broke eye contact. "I don't even know what I was thinking," she said in an appropriately choked voice, "but after hearing her gasping for breath, I suddenly realized what I was doing, and… I let go. I was… terrified at what I'd become, and… even then, she forgave me. But… I've never forgiven myself."

"Hazuki-chan," Tamao whispered.

"A lot has happened since then, and I have you and Chikaru to thank for most of it. But… as much as I hate to say it, I hoped I'd never have to tell you this. I hate the idea that somewhere inside me

there's still that horrible desperation, and…" She turned once more to Tamao, her eyes wide and aching with emotion. "I couldn't bear the thought that you'd be afraid of me."

There was another long silence, and in the end, Tamao was not quite certain where the words were coming from, but she said them anyway. "I'm not afraid of you, Hazuki-chan. Even in your darkest moments, you couldn't bring yourself to hurt someone you loved."

"But I tried, Tamao-chan. I tried."

"No, I don't think you did. Even as gentle as they are with me, I know how much strength you have in those hands of yours, Hazuki-chan. If you had *truly* wanted to do what you said you would, if you were *truly* the person you're afraid you are, you could have broken her neck instantly. But you didn't, because you're *not* that person, Hazuki-chan. She… gave you the choice to become that or not, and you *didn't* . You found your way back to the Hazuki we love."

"One day," Hazuki sighed, "I hope I can prove myself worthy of the faith you have in me."

Tamao stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her tormented lover. "You already have, Hazuki-chan," she whispered. "And you always do."

They held one another tightly, until with a sizzling sound, one of Hazuki's pots began to bubble over.

"Something's spilling," Tamao whispered.

"So it is," Hazuki agreed, showing no signs of loosening her grip.

Unable to stop herself, Tamao giggled at the silliness of the moment, and really, it felt good to be able to laugh after all that. With a melodramatic sigh, Hazuki planted a kiss on her forehead, then made to rescue her culinary efforts. "Could you let everyone know

that lunch will be ready soon?" she asked, giving Tamao a small (but this time very real) smile.

Kaori did not stop until she had found her way to an expansive back porch. The air had become stifling in the living room, and the salty scent coming from the ocean was a welcome change. She stood at the railing that bordered the wide wooden deck, rested her elbows on the weather-stained surface, and just hung her head for a moment, hoping that maybe the troubling thoughts would simply drain out somehow.

After listening to the distant surf for a while, she realized that there was someone standing beside her, and she looked over to see Chikaru gazing out at the distant sea as well. "Hello, Kaori-chan," the older girl smiled without looking away from the horizon.

"Hello," Kaori said quietly in reply.

"This may seem like a loaded question, but… how are you feeling?"

"I just got slapped by Konohana Hikari. If I ever needed evidence that this world is different from the one I left, that was probably it."

"Yes, being Etoile can change a girl, I've noticed." Chikaru then took a deep breath of the ocean air. "Beautiful day to be alive, isn't it?"

Kaori narrowed her eyes. "Subtle."

"I suppose not," Chikaru laughed. "But true nonetheless, really, don't you think?"

"I'm trying not to think *at all* right now," Kaori sighed. Contrary to her words, though, she felt one memory click with another. "By any chance were you friends with Tōmori Shion?"

"Ever since I was a little girl, yes. We've fallen out of touch since she went away to university, but she's still dear to me."

Kaori nodded. "You may have been right, then, about what happened to you in my world. There was a time a little more than a year ago, when Tōmori-san was still an assistant in the council, that she had to miss an official function because she was attending the funeral of a childhood friend who'd been bedridden for years."

"It's quite possible, then," Chikaru acknowledged. "And again, it certainly seems to fit Eve's pattern of choosing her sisters. It's possible that the shelves of the library are filled with Minamoto Chikarus and Sakuragi Kaoris and Azuma Hazukis who were all destined to die early… except we were the lucky ones who were saved."

"You'll forgive me if I don't feel lucky right now," Kaori sighed. She hung her head for a moment more, then looked over to see that Chikaru was peering intently at her. "What?"

"Sit with me a moment, Kaori-chan," Chikaru bade her, extending one hand in her direction.

After a pause, Kaori took the offered hand, and immediately felt a wave of warmth rush through her at this contact. Chikaru led them to a pair of deck chairs, and after they had seated themselves, she reached to take Kaori's other hand as well. "It's a shame you never had time to learn about your *Souma*, or had someone to teach you about it."

"I never even knew I had it until I met Hazuki-san," she admitted, remembering that first spark of energy when the sword-wielding girl had taken her hand in the abandoned council chambers. "Honestly, I've been trying to ignore it."

"I understand," Chikaru nodded. "It's a lot to learn to accept, but it's part of you now, so you might want to get used to having it."

With both of their hands joined, Kaori noticed more of the other girl's energy flowing through her, and in spite of everything, it was incredibly soothing. "What are you doing?"

"Checking for your pilot light," Chikaru said with a wink. "Even with a quick glance, I can tell how much like Hazuki-chan you are. The Keepers planted a seed inside you, to allow you to be what you were meant to be all along."

"What I was *meant* to be was *dead*," Kaori sighed.

"Perhaps. And perhaps I was, as well. But our sisters wanted something better for us, so they gave us this gift. Now, as much as I wish I had time to ease you into this gently with days of practice and meditation, I think your need is great enough that I should cut to the chase. Do you trust me enough to allow it?"

Part of Kaori wanted to shake her head, and pull her hands away, and hold onto that thought of what she knew she had to do. But that part of her did not control her voice. "I do," she whispered.

"Close your eyes, then, dear Kaori-chan."

Kaori did so, and almost immediately felt something more than just energy pass from Chikaru's hands to her own: it was something with life and presence and a brilliant green fire. She barely had time to gasp before this tiny sun touched something inside her, and then quite suddenly, everything changed.

For as long as she could remember, Kaori had loved to sew. As she had gotten older and gained the dexterity for it, she had also taken up knitting, crochet, and even weaving a time or two. There was nothing she loved more than taking a pile of seemingly random elements and putting them together into something beautiful. At times it would be frustrating, because she could always picture how it *should* look even before she started, and one tiny mistake would often ruin everything.

Later, after the dragons had come, and after she had learned the true nature of her sisters, Kaori had begun to notice how the world around her was, in so many ways, a series of threads all being woven together by unseen hands. It was something she could *feel*

more than see, and it resonated with the energy her immortal sisters had left inside her. All of which had made her removal from the world that much more horrifying: she remembered what it was like to undo a long series of stitches to correct a mistake she had made, but what Lilith had done to her defied description. Small wonder that she had so much difficulty telling others of what she had experienced as her thread had been removed, and the others that had been interwoven with her own had been cut away.

Now, however, as her *Souma* roared to life inside her, Kaori felt that her eyes were being opened for the first time, and she could see *everything* . Where before she had only an inkling of the patterns surrounding her every day, now she felt that she could truly perceive the entire world, and all its billions of threads constantly crossing and recrossing. But even as she tried to look ahead, to picture what was to come as she would when imagining her own projects, she found that she could not. There was a seeming randomness to it all, but for all its unplanned nature, Kaori knew, then and there, that something beautiful was being created.

And in the middle of it all, at the center of her own perception, she felt the glowing thread that was herself, currently twining around another that shone with a familiar green. And even though she knew, intellectually, that she had no part in the ongoing tapestry that was this world, there was something so *natural* about the way she continued to cross their threads, becoming a part of the whole.

She could not find her voice, but somehow she knew that other glowing strand would hear her.

What is this?

It's creation, my darling. Nice, isn't it?

While Shizuma had not quite fallen asleep in Nagisa's arms, she was nonetheless quite bleary as she heard a knock at the guest room door. She hurriedly took stock of the pair of them: they were

rumpled, but still decent. Before she could even call for whoever it was to come in, however, the door opened, and Miyuki poked her head in.

"Well," Miyuki said, her face breaking into a wide grin, "now *that's* more like it."

Nagisa softly yelped and broke away, and only then did Shizuma realize that the other girl's hand had been inside her blouse. "What is it?" she yawned, blinking several times to clear her eyes.

"Oh, nothing much. Someone had to check on you, though, and I figured it might as well be me. If you're interested, Tamao-chan says that Hazuki-chan is fixing lunch." The grin deepened further. "If you're hungry for something *else*, though, I can make sure no one else comes upstairs."

"Miyuki!" Shizuma shot back, trying to scowl. Somehow, though, she just couldn't manage it.

"See you when I see you," her old friend winked as she closed the door again.

Only when the door was shut behind her did Miyuki feel a tiny blush cross her face. While it was no end of fun being the one who got to do the teasing for a change, it was still something new to her. She found herself more than pleased to realize, however, that her happiness at seeing the pair of them together far outstripped the faint, but still very real jealousy she felt at the same. All things with time, she reminded herself.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was somewhat surprised to see Kaname there, holding up the wall and looking unnaturally pensive, arms crossed and head slightly bowed. At the sound of Miyuki's footsteps, though, she looked up and regarded her. "Konno-san," she nodded.

"Kenjō-san," Miyuki nodded in reply, somewhat surprised that Kaname had remembered her married name.

Kaname peered closely for a moment at Miyuki's hair, then shook her head. "Doesn't suit you."

"I didn't ask," Miyuki said airily as she walked past.

Tamao looked up as Shizuma and Nagisa arrived in the dining room just as Hazuki, still looking adorably domestic with an apron and oven mitts, was bringing something steaming and delicious-smelling to the table. (Tamao had wanted to help, but Hazuki smilingly shooed her to take a seat each time she attempted to do so.) Miyuki and Kaname were already seated, as was Hikari, so that left Kaori and Chikaru still unaccounted for.

Moments later, as Hazuki bustled back to the kitchen, Chikaru came in with a dazed, somewhat flushed-looking Kaori in tow, and Tamao had to wonder if the look on their guest's face had anything to do with the knee-buckling wave of *Souma* that had swept the house shortly before. Kaori wordlessly took a seat beside Tamao, while Chikaru looked around expectantly, then smiled hesitantly as Hazuki re-emerged from the kitchen carrying a tea service.

The moment Hazuki set down the silver tray, however, Kaori stood and approached the much taller girl. "Hazuki-san," she said, bowing deeply, "I must apologize for what I said to you earlier. I've been… under a lot of strain, but that does not excuse my behavior."

Hazuki gave Kaori a bemused smile, then bowed in return. "Honestly, Kaori-san, don't worry about it. If I held a grudge every time someone reminded me of how self-absorbed I can be… well, my blood pressure wouldn't thank me for it, that's for sure."

Kaori gave a tiny smile, and Tamao felt some of her earlier apprehensions ease. "I must apologize to all of you as well," she went on, turning to the rest of the table. "I'm still… uncertain of a

great many things, but… I think I'm willing to reconsider what you've suggested." She then looked directly at Hikari and said "Don't worry, I won't do anything… rash."

After another small bow, she took her seat again, and Hikari reached across the table to squeeze her hand. Shizuma and Nagisa were exchanging worried looks, obviously wondering what they had missed, but soon Hazuki was serving, and any further conversation was momentarily lost to *itadakimasu* and eating.

As the others began eating, Tamao noticed as Chikaru, seated next to Hazuki, leaned over and lay her head against their samurai's shoulder. Hazuki looked startled for a moment, but then she smiled and kissed Chikaru's dark hair, and Tamao knew that all was already forgiven, and Hazuki was well on her way to returning from her darker memories. She took a bite to cover the silly grin that was threatening to take over her entire face.

"As glad as I am to see everyone in better spirits," Miyuki said at length, "the pivotal question remains. What do you intend to do from here, Kaori-chan?"

Kaori looked down at her plate. "I'm not sure," she sighed. "I think it's plain enough that I can't stay here. I can't imagine there would be a cover story good enough to explain my reappearance, as you said. And if I stay here long enough, someone's bound to recognize me."

"Do you think you might try… joining another world, then?" Tamao asked gently.

"I'm not sure how that would work either," Kaori frowned. "If all of the other Kaoris were meant to die at the age of thirteen," she paused to give Shizuma an apologetic look, "then it might seem strange when she goes from being a terminally ill thirteen-year-old to a perfectly healthy sixteen-year-old."

"Awkward," Kaname agreed.

"There's also the possibility of going to a world that's different enough from our own that none of us exist in it," Chikaru suggested. "Of course, then you'd be pretty much alone, and that might be unpleasant, to say the least."

"But if there's trouble at the library, and you can't go back yet," Hazuki noted, "then… all of this is moot for the time being anyway." Tamao could tell that the news about the library was troubling Hazuki, as much as she tried to hide it.

"Which means… I'm kind of stuck here," Kaori grimaced.

"It's okay, Kaori-chan," Shizuma assured her. "I told you before, you can stay here at the house for as long as…" She suddenly went pale. "Oh, *hell* ."

"What is it, Shizuma?" Chikaru asked.

"My mother is having friends over this next week; they're arriving the day after tomorrow. She'd *certainly* recognize you, Kaori-chan."

"Maybe she could… stay in your apartment with you?" Nagisa asked her fiancée. Tamao could tell that Nagisa was anything but pleased at the idea, but found herself proud nonetheless that her roommate had made the suggestion.

"Awkward," Kaname said again. Shizuma shot her a positively venomous look, and the former Spica president rolled her eyes in reply.

"No, Shizuma-chan, I'm afraid that won't do at all," Miyuki said decisively. "I don't think there are enough therapists in the world to undo the damage. No, I think that until these keepers of the universe finish whatever the hell they're doing, Kaori-chan will be staying with me."

All eyes, particularly Kaori's, went to Miyuki then. "Mi- Konno-san," Kaori whispered, slipping back into formality.

"Trust me, we have *nothing* but room," Miyuki went on, "and I'm sure I'd have no trouble at all convincing my husband to allow a house-guest for an indefinite length of time. Heaven knows he's had a few of his own."

"Miyuki, are you sure?" Shizuma asked.

"Well, it would be on one condition," Miyuki allowed. She leaned across the table to look into Kaori's eyes. "You must not, under *any* circumstances, assume that you and I will fall in love. As much as we might have felt for each other's… *others*… well, you could say that I'm a woman who tends to dig in her heels at the idea of anything, *especially* love, being predestined."

"I… understand," Kaori nodded, giving a smile that suggested anything but. "Thank you, Miyuki-san."

"The pleasure is mine," Miyuki smiled in return. "Because even with that said, I must say I'm very much looking forward to the chance to get to know you again, Kaori-chan."

With the decision made, an air of ease settled over the gathering, as though the house itself were letting out a long-held breath. Conversation flowed naturally, smiles became more plentiful, and even Kaori was managing to look hopeful.

Hikari left early, after prevailing upon Shizuma to ask her driver to make an extra trip back to Astraea. Shizuma had originally invited everyone who was in on the "secret" (or as she sheepishly admitted to Kaori, "I thought I needed all the help I could get"), but with the need for one Etoile to stay on campus, Amane had remained behind. Knowing that her fellow Etoile would not want to miss the chance to meet Kaori, however, Hikari had offered to return and relieve Amane in order to allow her to join the reunion.

Kaname, however, elected to wordlessly dismiss herself from the group and find a quiet spot to think. She eventually ended up on a

balcony outside one of the upstairs bedrooms, where she had a good view of the ocean.

"Something about this just doesn't make sense," she muttered to nobody.

Even as she expressed this, a wholly unexpected voice came from nearby, and someone sidled up beside her to join her at the railing. "Well, Kaname-chan, looks like I managed to catch you alone!"

Determined not to let her surprise show in her voice, Kaname looked over and gave Lilith a smirk. "Yeah, I didn't feel like taking part in the hug-fest."

"A shame," Ken-chan said from the Keeper's shoulder. "So much beauty and so much affection in one room…"

"Hush," Lilith admonished the bird. "But yeah, here's me without a camera."

"So was it all for nothing?" Kaname asked. "You've come to take Kaori back after all that angst and planning?"

Lilith shook her head. "No, not yet. Dear Kaori will need to stay here a while longer while Eve tries to track down our little intruder. It's safe enough for me to come and go, though, so I can spend a little quality time with my would-be lunch date."

"Right," Kaname snorted. "So… I'm curious. After you put that world back together… did Miyuki still kill herself?"

"Why would you want to know?"

"Just curious to know if it was all in vain," Kaname shrugged. "I won't tell Kaori, don't worry."

Lilith studied her face for a while, then nodded slowly. "Fine. No, Miyuki did not kill herself."

"Fair enough," Kaname nodded in reply.

"However, as it turned out, Tamao-chan *did*," Lilith continued, and Kaname could not help but shiver at the tone of Lilith's voice. "At least, she would have, if I hadn't given history a little nudge to keep it from happening. I blame Eve for making me sentimental, but I couldn't let her die of loneliness after those *very* pleasant months I spent with her in my bed."

There was a brief silence, and then Lilith arched her eyebrows at Kaname. "You did *not* think you were my first, did you?"

"Oh, no, I could guess otherwise. So… tell me something, Lilith."

"Momomi's a cow," Lilith obliged her, smiling radiantly.

"… Okay, tell me something *else*," Kaname said, and before Lilith could get another word in, she continued. "What you did to Kaori… was that really necessary?"

Lilith blinked a few times. Either that or she was batting her lashes: Kaname could not tell which. "Whatever do you mean, Kaname-chan?"

Kaname turned around so that her back was against the railing and regarded Lilith steadily. "Why did you pull her all the way out of the book? Wasn't that a little more traumatic than it needed to be?"

"It had to be done," Lilith shrugged.

"Horse s**t," Kaname smiled sweetly. "You managed to fix her world so that no one remembered the dragons. Couldn't you have just… *nudged* a little history to make it look like she died young after all? Or hell, arranged for her to conveniently disappear under mysterious circumstances? Did you *really* have to erase her existence entirely?"

"I suppose another solution might have been possible," Lilith considered. "But like I said, it had to be done."

There was almost a hint of warning in Lilith's voice, but Kaname ignored it. "Why? Why did it *have* to be done?"

"Because she threatened her book," Lilith said, and her voice was suddenly cold steel in spite of her smile. "You may wish to recall, Kaname-chan, that I *ate* the last one who threatened a book, and I don't mean in the happy way. Given that, I think Kaori-chan got off light."

Kaname found herself unable to reply, and eventually Lilith continued. "At another time, I would have done a lot worse to her, but like I said, Eve's infected me with her sentimentality again, and Kaori-chan is the first mortal sister I've ever had. But even though I love her, she's still one of mine, and if someone's going to have the same kind of *Souma* as me, I'm going to make damned sure that they appreciate just how serious that is. Everyone's choices have a ripple effect on the future, but for Makers… that ripple can be *much* larger, as my Tamao-chan would attest. After what she's seen, I daresay Kaori-chan will think twice before she uses her *Souma* recklessly, don't you?"

"You *must* be a goddess," Kaname said quietly, unable to fully suppress a shudder, "because I don't think I've ever met a woman who scares me as much as you."

"Yes, yes, I'm great and terrible," Lilith chuckled. She then traced one fingertip playfully over Kaname's arm. "But don't forget, I'm also patient and loving. Good luck with old what's-her-face, Kaname-chan. I'll be waiting."

She stood on her toes to give Kaname a *Souma* -charged kiss on the cheek, then she and Ken-chan dissolved into green and were gone.

Kaname turned back to the distant ocean. She wasn't sure what to think about all that, and honestly, she questioned the wisdom of attempting to do so.

Next: Family

Family

I don't know when I noticed life was life at my expense

The words of my heart lined up like prisoners on a fence

The dreams came in like needy children tugging at my sleeve

I said I have no way of feeding you, so leave

-Indigo Girls

Part 9: Family

Eyes down and hands clasped before her like the obedient little girl her parents still thought she was, Momomi followed the small crowd of overdressed adults along a busy sidewalk in Kyoto. This was the first family meeting on "neutral ground," under the pretense of allowing Momomi and Kazuharu to get to know one another better in a less intimidating setting, seeing as the two of them were supposed to be getting married and all.

And where better to allow the Young Lovebirds to get better acquainted than at a high-end restaurant, eating tiny portions of artistically designed food-like product under the watchful eyes of both sets of parents? Her mother had grilled her on etiquette up until the last possible moment, and Momomi was fairly certain that she was expected to sit quietly, eat daintily, say nothing, and do her best to appear happy and appropriately fertile.

Without warning, however, a hand grasped her elbow, and she looked to her right to see Kazuharu raise his other hand to his lips in a "shush" gesture. Once he was certain he had her attention, he winked once, and then pulled her down a side street before she

could do so much as yelp. Within seconds, he had half-dragged her around a corner and placed his back against the wall, then took an exaggerated peek behind to make sure they had not been followed.

At this point, looking quiet, dainty and fertile went right out the window. "What the hell was *that* all about?" she asked her fiancé, who was even now grinning as he pulled out his cell phone and started hammering away at it. "What are you doing?"

"Texting my parents to let them know we're okay," he winked.

Momomi was nothing short of flummoxed. "But we… we're supposed to be..!"

"Oh, we can go back if you want, but to be honest, you didn't look like you were looking forward to it at all."

"But… won't you get in trouble for this?"

"Ehh, maybe," he snorted, giving her a roll of the eyes. "But it's at least as likely that they won't even notice we're gone. Besides, they'll be talking business the whole time, and… I'd rather talk about you. That *was* what this was supposed to be about, right?"

She very nearly cracked wise out of sheer reflex, but as he said this, Kazuharu smiled at her so openly and earnestly that the jibe died before it could reach her lips. To Momomi's shock, she realized that he actually *meant* it.

"So, Momomi-chan," he said as he put away his phone and offered his arm, "what sounds good to you? Noodles? Sushi? Teriyaki?"

"Sushi," she said carefully as she took his arm. She wasn't sure what he was up to, but she'd play along for now.

Hazuki peered down into the inky depths below as she dangled her feet over the abyss that was the central atrium. "So how many levels

are there, anyway?" she asked.

From beside her, Eve took a sip of her tea. "Why do you ask, Hazuki-chan?"

"Just wondering if it's infinite," Hazuki replied, turning her gaze upward to look into the likewise impenetrable black. "I never thought to ask Lilith that, even as many times as we came back here."

"Ah, I see," Eve nodded. "Well, it's… difficult to explain…"

"Yeah, I know, mortal minds like mine…"

"… but you could say that the Great Library is infinite… within limits."

Hazuki blinked a few times. "That's…" she began, but quickly trailed off.

"I know it sounds like a contradiction in terms," Eve shrugged.

"Actually, it makes a certain kind of sense," Hazuki admitted. "Something infinite, but not all-encompassing. Which explains why we have things like the Universal Garden and those damned dragons."

Eve did not reply, and when Hazuki looked over she saw that the goddess who had been her sister was staring down into that infinity beneath them. "Thank you for coming, Hazuki-chan," the deceptively petite girl whispered.

"Why wouldn't I come to visit my sister when she invites me for tea?" Hazuki smiled softly. "I'm the one who suggested it, right?"

"Still… it means a lot that you've forgiven me for… abandoning you," Eve sighed.

Hazuki swung herself down from the railing, then helped Eve down as well. "You know, I had a dream about you a few nights ago."

"Oh? Do tell."

"It was brief, but very vivid," Hazuki went on, feeling a slight blush creep over her cheeks as she remembered some of the images. "I was bringing you tea in bed. You were kneeling on the mattress, with a sheet just barely over your lap, and your hair was covering you just enough to make me wonder if my dreams have a network censor."

"I take it I wasn't wearing much?"

"Other than the sheet, no. And I wasn't much better: I had a man's shirt on, completely unbuttoned, and… pretty much nothing else."

"I… see," Eve nodded. "So… you still have *those* kinds of dreams about me, Hazuki-chan?"

Hazuki shook her head, grinning at the memory. "That's just it: it wasn't *that* kind of dream at all. It didn't feel like the morning after a night of sex, it didn't feel like foreplay, it felt… *comfortable* . Make no mistake, you were… you were beautiful, but…" She again shook her head at the thought of saying this to her Hatsumi. "It didn't *hurt* to look at you, the way it sometimes used to. I didn't feel that same hopelessness or self-loathing at the idea that I was taking something I had no right to. I felt… free. Free to enjoy being with you, even in that vulnerable state."

"So you dreamed of me naked… to show that you were over me?" Eve said with a raised eyebrow, but she seemed to be holding back a smile of her own.

"I've never been one to do things the sensible way, have I?" Hazuki chuckled.

"Perhaps not," Eve agreed. "But… all the same, I'm glad you've moved on, Hazuki-chan. It's… such a blessing to have you back, even if…"

"Hm?" Hazuki asked as Eve trailed off and looked down toward the stone tiles beneath them.

"Even if… I don't deserve you," the younger Keeper sighed.

"Stop that," Hazuki softly implored her, turning to take Eve's free hand in her own. "Everything I am and everything I have came from you. Without you, I'd have died a miserable shell. How can you think I don't deserve you?"

When Eve did not answer, and indeed could not even meet her former sister's eyes, Hazuki nodded slowly and went on. "It's because of how poorly things went with Kaori-san, isn't it?"

"It was my hope," Eve sighed, "that I could try to make some form of amends by visiting each of the ones I'd left behind, to tell them the truth of who I was, and what they were because of me. Kaori already knew, of course, but… since she was the most recent, and since she'd endured so much already, I wanted to comfort her." The young immortal shook her head. "I believe you've already heard how that turned out?"

"I have, yes."

"Before that, I visited Ryofu-chan, and… even though for her it's been many years since I left her world, she's still deeply traumatized by it. She seemed happy to see me, but…"

Hazuki sighed, remembering the horrible story she'd been told by Ryofu, and the quiet, monotone voice the young general had used when telling it. "You can't blame yourself for that, though. What happened in her world was hardly your fault, and if not for you, she'd likely have met the same fate."

"Perhaps, but… she was such a happy, carefree child, Hazuki-chan, and it was so hard to reconcile that with what she became."

"But that's no reason not to keep trying, is it? Surely there will be other sisters who'd be happy to see you again?"

Eve looked up at Hazuki and smiled sadly. "For every Chikaru to be inspired by me, though, how many Hazukis were there with their hearts left in ruins?"

"I…" Hazuki started, feeling that same heart drop as her own words were repeated to her. "I was angry when I said that," she whispered, suddenly too ashamed to look into Eve's eyes.

"Perhaps, but you were also *right*, Hazuki-chan. I've certainly left some messes." She indicated a nearby bookcase that had been completely cleared except for a single book, which appeared to be vibrating slightly. "My sister in this world has Maker powers that defy description, and even though she's not aware of them, she's strong enough to subconsciously rewrite her world on the fly. I'm terrified of how *that* meeting might turn out. Thankfully, she has friends who keep her in check, but for how long? I'll have to face her soon, and Lilith has already said that if it goes poorly, she may be forced to take drastic action."

"I don't think I went to this world," Hazuki said as she peered closely at the humming tome. "But there are some others you could start with, you know. Milka, Rushuna, maybe Yōko, certainly Mutsumi…"

"Perhaps," Eve repeated. "But I dare not visit *any* of them until I discover the location of our intruder." She then froze, looking very much like she wished she could take back those last words.

"Ah, good," Hazuki nodded. "I was hoping we'd get to this part…"

Konno Shin liked to consider himself an open-minded fellow. Of course, as a homosexual man in an arranged marriage with a lesbian woman, he also liked to consider himself one of the *luckiest* people to walk the face of the Earth. In the months since marrying Miyuki, he was continuously amazed at how much he had come to

love his wife as a *person*, even if neither of them had any desire to do That Thing that married couples do. At least, not with one another.

And so, when Miyuki had arrived home from an emergency visit to one of her school friends with a dark-haired late-teenage girl in her company, he was initially amused and determined to be happy that his wife was finally going to have someone to share That Thing with. But it hadn't taken long for Shin to realize that there was much more to the situation than this. The girl (introduced to him as Kurasagi Akiko), while obviously very attached to Miyuki (and, by his reckoning, very *attracted* to her as well), nonetheless had the hollow, beaten-down look of someone who'd recently borne an incredible loss.

After Akiko was shown to a guest room and left in the care of a maid who promised to prepare a bath for her, Miyuki pulled her husband aside to try to explain. "I'm sorry, Shin," she sighed. "I know I should have asked you first, but she had nowhere else to go. She'll need to stay here for a while."

"You don't have to explain, Yuki-chan," he assured her. "Is she an old schoolmate of yours?"

"I thought I didn't need to explain," Miyuki smirked.

"Well, no, I don't suppose you *have* to, but… a little bit of the story wouldn't hurt, if it's something you can tell."

"There's a lot of it I can't," Miyuki said with an apologetic smile. "She's not in any kind of legal trouble, so don't worry about that. You could say that… she's recently lost everything. Her entire world, as she knew it, is gone. At some point, a pair of… let's just call them *powerful* women will be taking her in, but not until they get their own house in order. In the meantime, she needs a safe home, with people who will understand some of what she's been through."

"You don't have to say any more than that," Shin nodded, holding up one hand to stop her. He could guess the rest just from how the other girl had looked at Miyuki. A young lesbian who'd been cast out for being what she was, no doubt. Perhaps even someone who'd been brave enough to stand up for herself in a way that Shin had not, and had paid the price for it.

Yes, he had been very lucky indeed, the way things had turned out.

"She'll need clothes," Miyuki went on. "She literally has nothing more than the clothes on her back. And books, too: this came right in the middle of her schooling, and I think continuing to study on her own will help her."

"Whatever she needs," Shin agreed. "I'll have someone pick out a few things in her sizes for the moment, until you have the chance to take her out shopping."

Miyuki smiled wearily, then leaned in to kiss her husband on the cheek. "Thank you, Shin. You're a good man. Which is probably why you're not straight, of course."

"Ehh, don't be so hard on the breeders," he shrugged. "They didn't choose to be born that way. So… what should we use as a cover story?"

"We can say that she's my live-in piano tutor," Miyuki said, answering quickly enough to make it plain that she'd already given this some thought.

"Oh! And will this tutoring actually happen?"

"She's agreed to it. And since I've never forgiven myself for giving up lessons…"

For a long time, the only sound was the ever-present ticking of a distant clock. Eventually it was Hazuki who broke the relative

silence.

"So… tell me about what's going on?"

"I didn't ask you here for that, Hazuki-chan," Eve said quietly. "Please believe me."

"I do," Hazuki assured her. "But here's what you may not be considering: even if you *had* asked me here for that, I wouldn't be upset."

"I made you a promise," Eve whispered. "I told you all that if I had anything to say about it, none of you would ever be called upon again to fix another of my mistakes. You… were so upset with me, Hazuki-chan, and rightly so. This should be my problem to solve. Only… I don't know if I can."

"I was upset," Hazuki said carefully, "because it looked like you were being irresponsible. If this intruder of yours sneaked in while you were trying to put things right with Kaori, well…" She shrugged. "That's different. So tell me what happened. Is it another dragon?"

Eve shook her head. "Nothing so overt as the Devourer, no. This was something of an opposite to me, if you will. It's… difficult to explain…"

"Mortal minds like mine," Hazuki nodded, waving dismissively.

"As near as I can tell, though, whatever it was entered the Library and hid itself in one of the books. And I don't yet know which one."

"Went into a book? That takes *Souma*, doesn't it? Not to mention the hat, or whatever power Aaya and Ken-chan have."

"It's complicated," Eve sighed. "You've heard about the three aspects of *Souma*, haven't you?"

"Healer, Maker and Guardian," Hazuki nodded. "Chikaru told me about it. That doesn't explain what the hell Aaya is, of course."

Eve looked thoughtful for a moment, and it took her several starts and stops before she got any words out. "Aaya is… different," she eventually said, gesturing with one arm to indicate the Library. "More than that, I cannot say."

"Because I'm not allowed to know? Or because *you* don't know?"

"Mostly because I don't know," Eve admitted. "I can say with certainty that he is no enemy of ours, though, and that's why Ken-chan has always been welcome here. But at any rate, I was talking about *Souma* . It's actually more complicated than just the three aspects…"

"Naturally," Hazuki nodded. None of this got to be simple, after all.

"… but for the most part, that way of looking at it holds up. Lives, worlds, and the strength to defend them. I don't want to go too deeply into the Traveler aspect, because it's not really separate: it's entwined with all three of the others. *Everyone* touched by *Souma* has some affinity with it. That's why you can pass between worlds."

"But we don't have enough of it to do so on our own?" Hazuki ventured. "Wait, does that make Aaya a fourth to you and Lilith and Yamiyama?"

"No, because Aaya is *different*," Eve reminded her. "He doesn't have *Souma* . His power is… something else."

"There are powers other than *Souma*, then?"

"There are… a few," Eve said, looking increasingly troubled. "Hazuki-chan, there is much that I simply cannot tell you, and you're beginning to ask questions that are putting me in an awkward position. I don't want you to think I'm being evasive, but…"

"But you're being evasive for a good reason," Hazuki chuckled, giving her one-time sister a lopsided smile. "Fine, fine, I'll turn down

my mortal curiosity a notch. So what can you tell me about the thing that got into the book? If it doesn't have *Souma*, what does it have?"

"It has… the very opposite of *Souma*, or at least an aspect of that power."

"Opposite of…" Hazuki frowned. "You mean death?"

Eve shook her head. "Death is part of life, Hazuki-chan. What I'm talking about here is the opposite of *creation* ."

With those words, Hazuki could all but feel herself go pale. "So… it has… *un* -creation? *Destruction*, even? Like the Devourer?"

"Not like the Devourer, no. He was…" Eve closed her eyes and gave another tiny sigh.

"Something I don't need to know about," Hazuki finished for her. "Okay, so there's someone with what amounts to anti- *Souma* in one of the books. Are we talking about a being like yourself, or someone more like me?"

"I think it's someone more like you," Eve nodded slowly. "A mortal being suffused with the power of… for lack of a better word, *decay* . And if that's true, that it *is* a mortal being not of our creation… Lilith and I may be powerless to interfere."

Hazuki thought about this for a while. "Would I be powerless to interfere?"

The clock ticked off several long seconds while Eve's face twisted with misery. "You're asking difficult questions again, Hazuki-chan."

"But would I be able to fight against it?"

"You're not my pawns, or my playthings," Eve said wretchedly. "I didn't give you *Souma* so that you could save me from my own short-sightedness. I…"

"Hatsumi…"

At the sound of this name, softly spoken, Eve ground to a halt and turned tearful eyes toward Hazuki.

"Hatsumi… would I be able to fight against it?"

After another long silence, Eve nodded once.

Hazuki returned the nod. "Then I will. Not because I have to. Not even because the idea of someone rotting one of the books from the inside out makes me sick to my stomach. I'll do it because I'd fight anything to keep it from hurting you again."

"You know," Eve said with a wistful smile, "Ryofu-chan said something very similar to that when I visited her. She said that she'd always protect me, if I ever needed her again. It was… humbling to hear that then, and it's just as much so now."

"Don't let that stop you from asking us, though," Hazuki insisted. "When you find out which book it is, call on me. I *want* you to."

"… Thank you, Hazuki-chan."

Kaname took a slow sip of her miso and looked anywhere but at the man seated opposite her. As always, she figured it would be better to let him start the conversation. And truly, what small talk would she make? *How are you? How's mother? How's business?* That would imply that she actually *wanted* to know.

For a long time, the only sounds were the low murmur of conversation from the restaurant's other patrons, and the ever-present *tink* of chopsticks and other utensils. Then, finally, Kenjō Noriyuki cleared his throat and spoke in a gruff voice. "Still wearing your hair short, I see."

"Shaved off your beard, I see," she replied without looking up. "Too much salt in there with the pepper?"

If anything, his tone darkened. "Your mother and I were very disappointed when we received word that you resigned as student council president."

"Is that so? Well, darn it all, you found me out. I did it strictly to embarrass you. Just like everything else I do."

"Let me see if I've got the full list," he sneered across the table. "Resigned as student council president. Quit the tennis team. Gave up the opportunity to compete for the Etoile position. On dormitory probation for an offense that the nuns won't give us particulars about, but which mysteriously happened at the same time that you quit the council. Am I missing anything?"

"You forgot 'kicked off the kendo team,'" Kaname reminded him.

"Are you that determined to sabotage your future, Kaname?"

"Maybe if you'd been paying attention, you'd notice that I'm also in the top five of my class in all subjects. And isn't that the point of going to school, really?"

"High marks have nothing to do with your future," the man grated. "You're building a reputation as a dilettante and a troublemaker. What man would want that in a wife?"

"Oh, here we go," Kaname sighed, rolling her eyes. "Still trying to follow that tired old path, are we?"

"I'm talking about your future, and your *duty*," he insisted. "It's going to be difficult enough already to find you a husband due to your… your *condition*…"

"You mean the fact that I'm not a virgin?" Kaname said in a conversational tone.

Noriyuki loudly shushed her, then took a look around the restaurant to see if anyone had been listening. "Don't say that in public! It's shameful!"

"Oh, it's *shameful*, is it?" Kaname smiled, finally looking up to meet her father's furious eyes. "Does it *shame* you that your daughter's not a pure woman?"

For a moment, it looked like the man might break his teeth under the force of his clenched jaw. Kaname then leaned forward and said the rest in a voice just over a whisper.

"Then maybe you should have thought of that before you whored out your nine-year-old girl for the sake of a f*cking promotion."

Hazuki pushed off from the railing with both feet. As promised, the area in the atrium was more or less zero-gravity, and before long she alighted on one of the large crystals that drifted through the open center of the Great Library. Looking back, she saw Eve grinning at her from the central hallway. "I always wanted to try this," she called back. "What would happen if I fell, though?"

"You'd drift to one of the railings eventually," Eve shrugged. "Or I could always throw you a rope, I suppose."

"I wonder how many of the mysteries of the universe could be solved by judicious use of rope?" Hazuki mused.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that one," Eve laughed. "Are there any other secrets I can unlock for your mortal curiosity, though? That is, if I'm allowed?"

"As a matter of fact," Hazuki said as she hopped to a neighboring crystal, "I was wondering what you could tell me about time travel?"

Eve's pronounced forehead crinkled in thought. "In what context?"

"In one of the last worlds we went to, Lilith and Ken-chan and I, we arrived about a generation too late, like usual, but when I heard about a former empress named Sarara… well, it gave me a strange feeling. So Lilith got Kogechibi to turn back the pages of the book while we were still inside, and we went back to the time in which Sarara lived. And… it was you."

"Yes, it was," Eve nodded, her smile fading.

"So… we actually *went back in time*, and I remember being really irritated with Lilith for not suggesting this earlier, because we had arrived in every world too late to find you, and it seemed to me that a little time travel could have fixed everything. But then when I saw you… when I saw Sarara… I ran toward you… and then everything faded to black, and we were suddenly in another time entirely. After that, Lilith refused to try it again, but wouldn't tell me why."

"I'm afraid that was my doing, Hazuki-chan," Eve sighed. "You see… I didn't want Lilith following me, so… I arranged things so that she could not enter a world during a time in which I existed."

"But if she entered during a time in which you *didn't* exist, and then went back in time..?"

"Don't forget that Kogechibi is an aspect of myself, though," Eve explained, allowing a small smile to return. "Lilith was clever enough to try asking her assistance, but… you could say I added another safeguard to prevent that from working. If Lilith ever came too close to finding me, Kogechibi would feel it and turn the pages away from my time again. I was very proud of myself for thinking of it, but… I never thought it would happen to you as well."

The crystal upon which Hazuki was standing had by this time circled closer to her original jumping-off point, so she made another graceful leap to land once more at her former sister's side. "Hatsumi… when you were Sarara, did you know who I was, as I came running toward you?"

"Yes," Eve whispered. "And I was… shocked, to say the least. The look on your face, the desperation in your eyes… the very same look you gave me as I disappeared from your world…" She trailed off for a moment, then took a long, slow breath before she continued. "I saw Lilith behind you, and… I realized that somehow, you had come to find me. After leaving you, I had always hoped that you might have found happiness without me, and lived out your life, but… there you were, the very Hazuki-chan that I remembered from my last day with you. You had crossed worlds for me. That was the next-to-last mortal life I led, Hazuki-chan, because after that I knew that *I* needed to find *you* . And then in my next life, I tracked you down to the Universal Garden."

Hazuki closed her eyes at the mention of this place. There was another question there: one that needed asking, as much as she dreaded it.

But first things first. "Shall we have some more tea?" she asked.

Kazuharu's choice of sushi restaurant, in spite of being mere blocks away, was about as different from their original high-end destination as it was possible to be. Not that the place was shabby or run-down or anything: it was cozy, somewhat loud, dare it be said even *quaint*, but also very… *pedestrian* . It was nothing like Momomi would have expected from a rich man's son trying to impress his future bride.

Moreover, as became evident when several of the cooks and servers waved to him and loudly called him by name, this was obviously not his first time in the establishment. After they were seated in a corner booth, the owner of the place came out to personally greet him and to coo over his date, but to Momomi's continued shock the old man was very friendly, informal and even family-like rather than holding a deferent "impress the wealthy" attitude. Their drinks were brought by a waitress who, with one hard smile, made it very clear to Momomi that many people were going to be watching her to ensure that she was worthy of the young man seated opposite her.

"I love coming here," Kazuharu grinned when they were once more alone. "Good people, great sushi."

"I see," she said doubtfully. "You, uh, come here often, then?"

"Well, we're fairly close to the university," he explained. "The shops and restaurants around here are used to dealing with students. We keep them in business rather than eat the dormitory food, and in turn they put up with us."

For a brief time, Momomi had the feeling that whatever type of food she'd requested, Kazuharu would have been able to lead her to a similarly cozy place where everyone knew his name. Somehow, she found this deeply unsettling.

"I can make a few suggestions if you'd like," he offered, indicating the menu. "I've tried just about everything they serve here at one time or another."

"Thank you, but I'll pick something out," she nodded, giving him a tight smile.

"Anything you'd like," he said with an easygoing wave. "Of course, if I'm going to be your husband, I should get in the habit of making sure you get what you'd like, shouldn't I?"

Momomi blinked slowly at him, wondering if perhaps that had been sarcasm. When he merely went on smiling at her, she was forced to accept the idea that it was not. Due to the fact that she had been attending St. Spica since the age of eleven, it could be said that Momomi did not know very many boys of her approximate age (unless she counted Amane, perhaps). Were they *all* this hopeless in the company of women?

"Can I pose another difficult question?" Hazuki asked as she poured each of them another cup of tea.

"Mmm, more about the secrets of the universe?" Eve smiled.

"Not this time. Actually, this one's probably going to be more difficult on my side than yours."

The soft smile faded. "Ask me, then."

Hazuki took a few steps away and looked around the small kitchen where not so long ago four schoolgirls had planned their attack on a horde of dragons. "Kaori's story got me thinking about what happened in the Universal Garden," she said at last.

"I forgave you for that long ago, Hazuki-chan," Eve said quietly.

"You're well ahead of *me*, then," Hazuki sighed. "There's something I've been wondering for a while now, though." She ground to a halt, unable to get the words out.

"Tell me what's troubling you, Hazuki-chan."

"If I hadn't stopped," Hazuki said thickly, "would you have really let me kill you? And would it really have *killed* you, or would you have just re-formed here in the Library?"

Eve looked down at the cup in her hands for a moment. "I wouldn't have stopped you," she said at last. "As for the rest of your question… I honestly don't know. We were outside of creation, so it's at least possible that I would have died a final death."

"You took that risk?" Hazuki choked out, as her throat tightened painfully. "Why? Did you know I wouldn't go through with it?"

"As much as I'd like to say so, Hazuki-chan? No, I didn't know. I thought your *Souma* and your grief might have driven you mad, and… if so, I was to blame for both. And if I had done that to you, well… I would deserve whatever happened to me. Creation would find another Keeper to take my role… and maybe this one would not abuse her powers the way I have…"

Tamao looked up from her book as Chikaru made the short climb up the grassy rise of Tamao's favorite Reading Place before enacting an overly theatrical collapse at the younger girl's side, ending up flat on her back. "Could someone tell me why it is that family is always so difficult?" Chikaru asked, seemingly posing this plaintive question to the world as a whole.

"Lunch with your mother went well, then?" Tamao asked, gently patting Chikaru on the top of the head.

"I graduate in a few months, I'm the president of Lulim for the third year running, and she still tells me it's not too late to transfer to Miator. Meaning no offense to the storied history of your place of schooling, Tamao-chan, but I think it would be less painful to be nibbled to death by a horde of rabid hedgehogs than it would be to put myself under her thumb like that."

Tamao giggled at the metaphor, then winced as she thought about it a little more. "Well, she's bound to be proud of the school that she's an administrator for, I suppose. Did it offend her that you wanted to go to Lulim? Did she think it was to rebel against her?"

"No, because she knows I wanted it because of Naoko," Chikaru smiled wanly. "Lulim has a better program for special needs, so she never questioned Naoko going there, but… she's always made it clear that she wanted… *better* for me."

"So the inter-school rivalries aren't restricted to the students, eh?"

Chikaru cocked an eyebrow at her. "Tamao-chan, I think the administrators have it *far* worse than *we* do. I've overheard conversations that would make student council meetings look like afternoon tea with Hello Kitty."

"How terrifying."

"Indeed. But at least when she asked me, in her own elliptical way, about these rumors that I'm involved in a torrid threesome, I was able to look her in the eye and tell her that I haven't kissed either one of you." Here, her smile turned decidedly sardonic. "So score one for celibacy, I guess."

Tamao briefly ran her fingers through Chikaru's dark hair. "You'll tell me as soon as you're ready to give her something to talk about, won't you?"

"What? And lose my bet with Shizuma?" Chikaru teased, though Tamao was more certain than ever that she could see a hint of frustration behind the humor in her eyes.

Over the course of their lunch, Momomi learned a few things about Kazuharu that she would not have expected. First of all, he was surprisingly easy to talk to, and before long she was telling him all sorts of details about her tastes in music, fashion, movies, books, and even studies. He listened attentively, and she could all but see him making mental notes and trying to capture every detail.

Secondly, he was kind of a goofball, and didn't seem to care that she knew it. At the same time, he was perhaps the most *genuine* person Momomi had ever met: either that or he was a better actor than Kaname could ever hope to become. He was humble without seeming falsely self-effacing. Not once did he try to impress her with his family's wealth, or talk about his car, or brag about athletics. He made this date all about her, from the moment he pulled her off the stage their families had carefully constructed and sat her down in a college-area sushi bar.

Third, because of the above, Momomi was quickly figuring out that if she had to marry this guy, she would completely rule the roost. He was *already* eating out of her hand, and she wasn't even *trying* yet. She had no doubt that she'd be able to charm *anything* out of him with at most minimal effort. She'd cut her teeth on the constant feint

and parry of her relationship with Kaname, after all. Kazuharu wouldn't stand a chance.

To her surprise, though, this realization made her feel strangely uncomfortable, and she couldn't put her finger on why. Would she get bored at always getting her way? Would she miss the challenge of having a lover who could also be an adversary?

"So what do you want to study at University?" Kazuharu asked suddenly.

"University?" she repeated, somewhat surprised at the question.

"If you want to go, that is," he added.

"What makes you think I'd *get* to?" she frowned.

"Because if you want to, I think you should go," he said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. "I'd back you up a hundred percent."

He would, too. She could see it in that disarming smile of his. "Well… I haven't thought much about it since I heard about the engagement," she admitted. "Even with the prestige of St. Spica, it's really all about test scores now, isn't it? I guess I'd have to see what I qualified for."

"Ah yes, St. Spica," he nodded. After a pause, his grin deepened. "Okay, I *have* to ask this, so please forgive me for being a stereotypical male. Are the rumors about those three schools true?"

"Which rumors?" she asked, cocking her head to one side.

"Well, I guess it's always going to sound different from the outside, but… the joke has always been that Astraea Hill's major industry is yuri and its primary export is lesbians. Is there really *that much* of it going on up there?"

She blinked at him. "You're right, that *is* a stereotypically male thing to ask."

"Sorry, sorry," he chuckled. "I always figured that like most rumors, there's probably a tiny kernel of truth to it, but in this case it's mostly just wishful thinking on guys' parts."

"Or wishful thinking *by* guys' parts," she muttered.

Kazuharu had been about to take a drink, but stopped before his laugh could become a spit-take. "Well said!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're picturing me with another girl *right now*, aren't you?"

"Oh, God no."

"What, you've got a problem with lesbians, then?"

He winced at this. "No, not at all. True love without having to deal with men? More power to them, I say. I just… don't think it's decent to think about the woman I want to marry in that way."

Momomi quickly realized that an opportunity was presenting itself, and that her efforts to rule that roost could begin even now. Bringing a practiced, coy smile to her face, she stared directly into Kazuharu's eyes. "Come on," she purred. "Are you saying it'd *upset* you if your wife brought another girl home with her some night?"

He stared back at her, and his face took on a surprisingly contemplative look, given the subject matter. "Hmm. If you were to bring home another woman as a lover, I think… I'd probably want to find a quiet place in the house to curl up and die."

She blinked twice, having not expected this answer at all. "What for?" she asked.

"Because," he said slowly, "that would mean that there was something that my wife needed that I couldn't give to her, no matter how much I wanted to."

Purely by reflex, Momomi once more wanted to crack wise, but again something in Kazuharu's eyes killed the retort before she could give it words. To her deep shock, she realized that this was not the standard macho reaction, where his puffed-up male ego would be crushed, or his vaunted prowess in bed would come into doubt.

This was a man who truly wanted to give her everything, and would move heaven and earth to do so. This was a man who would measure his life by her happiness, and to find himself unable to personally fulfill her every wish would tear his heart out.

Momomi now recognized the uncomfortable feeling for what it was. It wasn't fear of boredom. It wasn't despair over losing the combative aspect of love that she knew so well.

It was the idea that Kazuharu was probably the most relentlessly, maddeningly *decent* person she had ever met, and not only would she happily fleece this honest, trusting man for all he was worth, but she was already formulating a plan on how to do so. And it came *naturally* to her.

She didn't know what exactly that said about her, but at that moment, she was sure she didn't like it.

"Momomi-chan?" Kazuharu said, frowning at her silence. "I'm sorry, that was my fault, pay it no mind. So what *do* you think you might like to study?"

The moment passed, and she did her best to get back to the game. Maybe if she ignored that nagging feeling, it would go away.

Finally, their stroll around the Great Library brought Hazuki and Eve back to a familiar shelf, in front of which Hazuki's book lay on the floor, open. "Thank you, Hazuki-chan," Eve smiled up at the taller girl.

"We should do this again sometime soon. Who knows, maybe by then I'll have finally used up all my crushing angst."

"It may be some time before I *can* see you again, but… thank you for today."

"Call on me anytime," Hazuki assured her. "And by anytime, I *especially* mean when you find out which book it was. I *mean* that."

"I'll let you know," Eve nodded. "With any luck, the next time we speak I'll be able to tell you that it's all been taken care of, and that you needn't worry."

"I *want* to worry about you," Hazuki reminded her. "Let your overprotective little sister be… well, *overprotective* once in a while."

Eve's smile took on an absurdly cute shyness, and Hazuki found that she just *had* to hug the smaller girl. So she did.

The gesture apparently took Eve by surprise, as she quickly went stiff in Hazuki's arms, but after a moment she relaxed against her and just let herself be held. Hazuki tightened her arms around the goddess, and brought one hand up to rest in Eve's golden hair.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, though, something stirred deep within Hazuki, and while it was not *Souma*, it was nonetheless very real, and aching in its familiarity. Her heart started beating faster, and suddenly she was fourteen again, and it was that day under the blossoming cherry tree, when she'd held Hatsumi against her and first recognized these feelings for what they were. The day that the warmth and softness of Hatsumi's body against hers no longer inspired comfort, but desire. The day that she realized she was in love with her adopted sister.

And it was a feeling that, here and now, she knew that she should *not* be having. She closed her eyes and tried to will her racing pulse to subside, hoping that Eve would somehow not have noticed.

She knew better, though.

"Hazuki-chan?" Eve whispered against her.

"I'm sorry," Hazuki sighed. "I guess… maybe I'm not as over you as I thought I was." With very real reluctance, while at the same time hating herself for feeling it, Hazuki released Eve and took two slow steps back.

Rather than be upset, though, Eve took her hands and smiled. "It's okay, Hazuki-chan. You haven't done anything wrong. First loves can have that effect on anyone. It doesn't make you a bad person, and it doesn't mean you love Chikaru or Tamao any less."

"Right," Hazuki nodded, hoping that she would be able to convince herself of this. Years of practice at self-loathing told her otherwise, though.

"Keep in mind that you're talking to a fertility goddess," Eve winked. "I've had a lot of practice at knowing whether or not hearts are true."

"I appreciate that," Hazuki said, letting out another short sigh. "Hopefully they'll be as understanding."

After giving Hazuki's hands a last squeeze, Eve knelt to pick up the twin-crowned Hat of the Keeper from where she'd left it after summoning Hazuki from the book, and placed it back on her head. Immediately, she began to glow with *Souma*, and she extended one hand back toward the taller girl. "Give them both my love," she smiled. "More importantly, give them yours."

"Always," Hazuki smiled weakly, reaching to take the offered hand. As soon as they touched, the world went green, she felt a familiar pull, and she was on her way home.

Kaname took another sip of her miso and enjoyed the silence, though she fancied that she could hear her father's blood pressure

rising in the wake of her last comment.

"This wasn't about a promotion," the man said at last through gritted teeth. "This deal changed our lives. The nice house you get to live in? The fancy school you get to go to? *All* of that comes from the deal we made."

"The deal," Kaname mock-sighed. "I love the way you call it *the deal* . Is that how you sleep at night, papa? By thinking of sending your little girl to get raped by a gangster as *the deal* ?"

"Saiga-sama is *not* a 'gangster,'" Noriyuki started.

"And I *also* love that *this* is the part of what I said that you object to," Kaname interrupted, still smiling. This had been building up for a long time, and now that it was finally coming out, she wanted to relish every moment of it. "Fine, then. Saiga is a sick f*ck with an incurable Lolita complex who just so happens to have enough wealth, power and clout to be able to make *deals* with his subordinates to get what he wants. And oh, yeah, he's a gangster. Don't give me any crap about how legitimate his business is. I've done some spelunking, papa, and I know *much* more than you think I do."

Noriyuki fumed at her for a moment, then made a visible effort to compose himself. "You should learn to think better of him," he warned her. "It just so happens that Saiga-sama and I have been discussing a possible match for you. Do you remember Hoshi-kun?"

"Hoshi-kun..?" Kaname gaped. "Saiga's *kid?* Am I on drugs here, or are you *seriously* telling me that you want me to marry that bastard's son?"

"Hoshi-kun is a fine young man…"

"If he turned out to be anything short of a basket case or a serial killer, it'll be a miracle," Kaname spat back. The smile was gone now, as more memories were dredged to the surface. "Did you know that

Saiga made him *watch*, papa? 'Son, now *this* is what you do with a woman.' I'll be amazed if that poor kid has a *shred* of sanity left."

"It's not as though you have a lot of prospects, Kaname. This may be your best chance. You'll be well taken care of."

"Oh, I have no doubt. With *him* as my father-in-law? Yeah, I'm sure I'd be *taken care of* . Forget it, papa. I won't do it."

"Are you thinking you have a choice?" Noriyuki said coldly.

"Okay, then," Kaname said, bringing the smile back to her face and leaning across the table. "Let me spell it out for you, then. I. Will. Not. Marry. Him. More to the point, I won't marry *any* man you choose for me. And do you want to know why?"

She waited a moment to let her father answer, but when he did not, she continued. "Because I'm queer, papa. I'm a dyke. Your little girl is a rug-muncher. And I'd be more likely to bite one off than let one inside me again. Are we clear?"

Kaname sat back in her chair and waited for the reaction. By the deepening color of his face, he'd never suspected this, which was sadly unsurprising.

"It's that damned school," he growled. "I knew we should never have sent you to an all-girl school like your mother insisted. Well, *that* can be corrected. It's not too late to pull you out of there, you know."

"Really?" Kaname said, arching her eyebrows. She then almost laughed as she realized that she was about to quote Hazuki, of all people. "Papa, do you *really* want to put me in a position where I feel like I've got nothing to lose?"

"You have a duty to your family…"

"No, papa. No. Let me tell you exactly what's going to happen. I'm going back to St. Spica to have *glorious* sex with my girlfriend, and

you're going home. If you even *try* to remove me from school, I'll tell mother all about the *deal*, in every excruciating detail. If you continue this insane marriage idea, I'll expose Saiga's so-called legitimate business. And if that sick son of a bitch touches me *ever* again, I - will - f*cking - *kill* - him."

Noriyuki took a stiff breath, and Kaname watched the veins on his forehead pulse until they looked like they might burst. "You mustn't say such things about Saiga-sama," he hissed. "If you do… I may not be able to protect you."

"Oh, yes," Kaname nodded, rising from her seat and throwing her napkin onto her plate. "Because you've done such a *fine* job protecting me so far."

With a mix of disgust and what looked like genuine surprise, Noriyuki shook his head at his daughter. "What *happened* to you, Kaname?"

"I found an angel to forgive my sins, papa," she smiled coldly. "Good luck finding one for yours."

She stalked out of the restaurant, leaving her father seething in his chair.

As soon as the glow faded, Eve knelt to pick up the book that Hazuki had chosen for her home, closed it, and placed it back upon its shelf. Her fingertips lingered on the spine of the tome for quite a while as she sought out the five presences of *Souma* within.

The reassuring smile she'd tried to give Hazuki slowly disappeared, and Eve became all too aware of the sound of the distant clock. With Lilith still working on repairing the damage done by the dragons, that sound had been Eve's only company for quite some time now. She tried to hold onto the memory of Hazuki's voice a little longer, but it was already fading.

To be honest with herself, she wasn't sure what had compelled her to ask Hazuki to join her for tea. More specifically, why had she *only* asked Hazuki?

"Maybe I'm not as over you as I thought I was," she repeated, wondering if Hazuki had any idea how mutual those feelings were.

Eve took a deep breath, then, and got back to work: there were many books to sift through yet as she tried to track down her uninvited guest. As tedious as it was, and as lonely as it was, it was something she needed to do, and as she herself had told Hazuki once before, loneliness was the very least she deserved after everything she'd done.

Next: Rage

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Hazuki's meeting with Sarara took place in episode 14 of *Touka Gettan*, another production of Studio Deen. Hazuki, Lilith and Ken-chan guest-starred in the episode, making it more or less a "lost story" of the Yami canon.

Rage

There's just enough of you in me

For me to have sympathy

And take it in stride - I know I had mine

And you were as kind, I am told

-Indigo Girls

Part 10: Rage

"For Christ's sake, Kaname, what is your *problem* today?"

Kaname looked up from her lunch to see Momomi staring at her from the other side of the bench, looking vaguely annoyed. "What?" she asked, defensively.

"You keep muttering under your breath, and you've been doing it ever since last night. Seriously, what's eating you?"

For a moment, Kaname wanted to continue protesting, but she had to admit that Momomi was right. She had certainly been preoccupied with unpleasant thoughts after yesterday's lunch meeting. A look at the mangled sandwich in her hands only confirmed it: she was feeling a lot of tension. "Sorry," she said with an expressive sigh. "I've got a lot on my mind."

Momomi looked partially mollified by the apology for all of about three seconds, then she frowned. "You know, I have a lot of work to do for the council, and I'm trying to make time to have lunch with you, but if you're going to ignore me, maybe I should just stay back at the office."

"I said I was sorry," Kaname sighed again, but with a little more force in her voice this time. "Look, I had a rough day yesterday. You know how much I hate seeing my father, and… this time we hit an all-time low in the field of parent-child bonding."

"What happened?" Momomi asked, a hint of actual concern crossing her face.

Kaname took a slow breath, considering whether or not she wanted to get into this now, even in the relative seclusion of the Spica courtyard. She had not dared bring this up to Momomi thus far, because the rage had been too fresh and too raw. She had cooled off a little since then, though; maybe it would be best to finish getting it out of her system. "My father is trying to set me up to marry his boss's son," she said at length.

Given the ever-present birdsong and the constant shouts from the distant athletic fields, it could not exactly be said that a long silence followed, but nonetheless it was quite some time before Momomi stopped blinking at her and spoke. "Wait… he wants to… marry you off?"

"He probably thinks it'll score him some more points with the old bastard," Kaname snorted. She could feel the bile rising in her throat even as she thought about Saiga, and what he had put her through. Much of the past twenty-four hours had been spent fantasizing about the creative revenge she wished for.

Revenge that she was now more than capable of administering, she knew: a thought that gave her deep satisfaction as well as an equally real sense of disquiet.

Rather than follow that train of thought yet again, though, Kaname returned to the here and now by giving a dismissive wave and a roll of the eyes. "Anyway, he can try all he wants. I've already refused, and if he knows what's best, he won't push it." She turned a thin smile on Momomi, but the expression quickly turned into a frown.

Momomi looked… *unsettled* . "What is it?" Kaname asked her.

"Maybe you…" Momomi said hesitantly, then stopped.

"Maybe I what?"

"Maybe… maybe you should consider it."

In the years of their relationship, with all its feint and parry, all its gamesmanship and competition, Kaname could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that Momomi had left her completely speechless. And now she was going to have to add another finger to that count.

Perhaps noticing the look of slack-jawed shock Kaname was giving her, Momomi continued. "If it's his boss's son, then… it would probably be a move up in social standing, wouldn't it?"

"Social… standing?" Kaname managed. "Momomi, social standing can go and f*** itself. Hello? This is *me* we're talking about here. Maybe you haven't been paying attention for the last five years, but I'm… I don't know, ever-so-slightly gay?"

"Well, *yes*, but… it's not as though we have a lot of men in our lives, going to school here," Momomi pointed out. "Who's to say anyone who goes to this school is *really* gay for any other reason than lack of options?"

For a moment, Kaname had to give serious consideration to the idea that this conversation was not actually happening. She suddenly found herself flashing back to a talk with Chikaru in the gym, when a similar question had been posed. Truth be told, it was a question that had stayed with her in the time since, and it was a question that made her very uncomfortable, in spite of her self-assertion that no one else, by action or inaction, had made her who she was. "Who's to..? Momomi, *I'm* to say that. I'm queer, through and through. Not to mention committed to someone?" She fervently hoped that Momomi wouldn't use this opportunity to bring up Lilith again.

"Oh, *wake up*, Kaname," Momomi growled. "What, do you think that after we graduate, you and I are going to be able to get married? Have a little house together? We're *high society* . We're *supposed* to end up in empty, arranged marriages. If this is going to get you ahead in the world, you should do it."

Kaname was quickly running out of fingers.

How could Momomi say such a thing? Never mind the veiled assertion that being with a man could change her: how could she so much as suggest that Kaname consider marrying into the family of the man who'd raped her? She had always known her partner to be unhealthily obsessed with social status, both her own and that of their peers, but this was obscene. Didn't she know who Saiga was? What he had done?

But then, with shocking clarity, Kaname realized that Momomi did not, in fact, know about any of this. Because in all these years, Kaname had never told her.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear you say that," Kaname said in a tight, shaky voice. "It's not going to happen. Period."

"I'm just saying that if you have a good chance, you should go for it," Momomi insisted. Her face worked through several unfamiliar expressions before settling on a painful attempt at flirtatious. "Besides, who's to say you couldn't still have me, even married? I'd be willing to be the mistress."

"Willing to…" Kaname sputtered. "Is that all you think you are to me, after everything we've been through? Just an affair, while I'm stuck in some man's bed? What happened to wanting me to stay with you, and fight for you? What are you *saying* here?"

"I'm *saying* that I'd make that sacrifice for you!" Momomi said, heatedly. "If it meant something good for you, I'd settle for being your girl on the side. I know where your feelings would really be. We

wouldn't have to lose anything, and… and maybe there would be something to gain, for *both* of us!"

Kaname had, by this time, mostly learned to deal with the presence of the *Souma* inside herself, relegating it to background noise unless she needed it. Since seeing her father the previous day, however, it had been seething beneath the surface, and now the thick, slow warmth of it was rising, filling her almost to the point of pain, threatening to burst through at any moment. Briefly, she had the incongruous thought that she needed to tell Tamao she had been right: it was turning out to feel like molten lava after all. And she herself was the volcano on the verge of erupting.

Thoughts were quickly giving way to fury, but she had enough presence of mind left to know that she could not stay here, lest she say (or even *do*) something to Momomi that she would later regret. "I have to go," she managed as she pushed herself to her feet and hurried away, feeling Momomi's bewildered eyes upon her as she made her retreat.

Still somewhat restless and lost in thought, Hazuki aimlessly wandered the lower level of Strawberry Hall, exchanging subdued greetings with teammates and acquaintances as she passed. Bits of the conversation she'd had with Chikaru and Tamao the previous night were still echoing in her head, and not for the first time, she wondered guiltily if she should have kept secret the emotional surge she'd felt upon having Hatsumi in her arms again.

Chikaru, unsurprisingly, had been understanding itself, echoing the sentiment expressed by Eve and reminding Hazuki that a first love was always the most difficult to let go of. ("Besides," she had shrugged, "no kiss, no foul. You felt temptation, and you backed away from it.") Tamao, however, had been visibly unsettled by Hazuki's admission, and while she had made an effort to say that she understood, there had been an uncharacteristic feeling of tension in the nightly cuddle. Hazuki could not help but wonder whether it had been too much to admit to her encounter with Eve so

soon after disclosing her horrible actions in the Universal Garden, but at the same time, she knew that simply sitting on those feelings of shame could only hurt them in the end.

One thing was certain: between the meeting with Kaori, and now this, Hazuki was more than ready to put the past weekend behind her, and try to earn back some of the trust she feared she might have lost.

Preoccupied by these and many other thoughts, Hazuki nearly ran over Kizuna before noticing she was there.

"Hazuki-senpai," the Lulim third-year addressed her, giving a deep bow, "I must apologize to you."

"Apologize..?" Hazuki asked, confused by the serious tone coming from the normally gleeful junior. "I'm the one who almost crashed into you. What do *you* need to apologize for?"

"I apologize for… for honking your girlfriend," Kizuna went on, grimacing as she said the last words. "Please forgive me."

For a few moments, Hazuki could not for the life of her figure out what Kizuna was talking about, but then she remembered an unexpected grope during Friday night's anime party. So much had happened since then that it seemed a distant memory. "Thank you, Kizuna-chan, but don't you think you should be apologizing to Tamao-chan and not me?"

"Um, yes," Kizuna nodded. "And I will, but… I wanted to talk to you first, because… well, because *Kachou Kamen* is meeting today, and I didn't want there to be any hard feelings, and I *promise* I didn't even enjoy it, well not *much* anyway, and that's *not* to say that Tamao-chan doesn't have nice breasts, because they're really *really* nice, not that I had *too* long to enjoy it, because I *didn't*, and…" Here, Kizuna took a breath and bowed again. " *Please* don't punish me, Hazuki-senpai."

Hazuki glanced down the hall to see Remon peeking out from the next corner, looking nervous. "Kizuna-chan," Hazuki said, almost laughing at the display, "I'm not going to punish you, I promise."

The younger girl's lower lip quivered for a moment, then she sprang forward and hugged Hazuki tightly. "Thank you, Hazuki-senpai."

"I hope I didn't scare you too badly," Hazuki chuckled, hugging the smaller girl in reply. "Honestly, though, Kizuna-chan? You're one of the first people who welcomed me here, and I adore you. It would take a lot more than an inappropriate squeeze to make me angry with you, much less to make me want to punish you. And I'd never intentionally pick on you in practice, so don't worry about it."

"Do you really mean that, Hazuki-senpai?"

"I mean it. I can't stay mad at you over a honking."

"Do you really, *truly* mean that, Hazuki-senpai?"

"I promise," Hazuki laughed.

"That's good to know," Kizuna nodded against her.

Hazuki was more than aware of how much the presence of *Souma* had changed her, both over the course of her journey and since. Her reflexes were honed to the proverbial needle-point, and her instincts were strong enough to make her almost prescient in certain situations.

Even with all of this, however, occasionally something utterly unexpected would come along and catch her completely flat-footed.

" *Honk!"*

And then a maniacally grinning Kizuna was gone in a flash of ginger pigtails, ducking around the corner with Remon, sharing a loud squee with her partner in crime before vanishing with the sound of

two sets of receding footsteps almost before Hazuki could even raise a hand to cover her recently groped breast.

She stood there stock-still for a few seconds, still in shock, then laughed in spite of herself. She made a mental note to warn Chikaru, just in case Kizuna might want to try for the honking hat trick sometime soon.

Even as she had this thought, though, a strained voice came from behind her. "Hazuki."

The tall Spican looked around to see Kaname approaching her from down the hall, looking particularly stormy. "Kaname," she nodded. "What's going on? You look like hell."

"You got time for a spar today?" Kaname asked in lieu of an explanation.

"Um… possibly. Why?"

"Because I'm suppressing a lot of rage right now, and I need to take it out on someone that I know can handle it. You game?"

Hazuki blinked at her former nemesis. "Well, when you put it that way, how can I refuse?"

Kaname nodded. "When?"

"I've got about half an hour between kendo and *Kachou Kamen* . Come by the gym. Will naginata be okay?"

"That'll do," Kaname said shortly, then nodded again and stalked back down the hall, leaving Hazuki to wonder what had brought that on. It occurred that maybe someone was having a stranger day than she was after all.

Kizuna and Remon did not stop dashing until they were well clear of Strawberry Hall. "So!" Remon giggled, caught somewhere between sheer terror and an equal amount of glee. "What exactly brought *that* on?"

"It's the art of the honk," Kizuna nodded, trying to look solemn and sage (and failing utterly). "You need to find the opening and seize the day."

"Or seize something else, in this case."

"Yeah. *Carpe pectus*, that's what I always say."

"You've never said that before in your life!"

"Then maybe I need to start."

"So… was it everything you dreamed?" Remon chortled.

Kizuna held out the hand which had performed the deed, then turned it slightly to consider it from another angle. "Simply majestic. Full, soft, with just a hint of the corded steel that is the rest of her."

Remon chose not to ask what a corded steel bosom would feel like. "Yeah, well, forgiveness or not, you'd better keep an eye on that hand, or it might go missing one of these days."

"Not before my work is done," Kizuna grinned. "The only question now is…"

"Is..?"

"Who's next?"

Remon blinked a few times, then took a deep breath, not-so-accidentally puffing out her chest in the process.

"Who shall be the next to feel the touch of the Masked Honker?" Kizuna went on.

"Hmm, who indeed?" Remon agreed, not-so-surreptitiously stretching both arms over her head and arching her back.

"What glorious bust will be my next target? I think it shall be…"

Remon clasped her hands behind her back and gave her shoulders a not-so-subtle wiggle. She even began a classic Innocent Whistle.

"… Remon-chan!" Kizuna cried suddenly.

"Hmm?" Remon smiled, leaning in more closely.

The hand in question shot forward and closed over Remon's… shoulder. "Where do you think Yaya-senpai is right about now? I'm sure Tsubomi-chan can't be watching her *all* the time. Come on!"

With that, Kizuna dashed off, leaving Remon to slowly deflate.

Months ago, in one of their long talks, Chikaru had imparted a particularly unique piece of advice for coping with the strangeness of Remon's day-to-day experiences. Life, her onee-sama had said, is like being on stage or screen. Sometimes the best thing to do is to think of the absurdities as being part of the script, acted out for someone else's entertainment. Think of life itself as having a fourth wall, and then remember that fourth walls are meant to be broken.

And so, Remon turned to the invisible audience and sighed. "What am I going to do with her?" she said as an aside, then turned to chase after her fellow actor.

Nagisa checked to make sure the wrappings on her practice naginata were secure (even though it did not have an actual blade, it was necessary to wrap that section in cloth while carrying it through the public areas of the dormitory), then reached under her bed to pull out the duffel bag containing her sparring gear. "I never thought I'd say this, Tamao-chan, but after the weekend we just had, I'm really looking forward to practice today. I've never been that much of an

athlete, but I think it'll really feel good to work off some of the leftover tension."

"Hmm… the weekend was certainly… challenging," Tamao said quietly from her side of the room.

Realizing belatedly the way in which her words might have been construed, Nagisa amended herself. "I didn't mean it to sound like I don't enjoy practice. I do, really. It's just… hard not to be intimidated. You're all so much better at it than I am. Even Kagome-chan beats me five times out of six when we're sparring." She paused a moment before starting the laborious process of unbuttoning her uniform dress, then quickly slipped it off and started getting into her loose-fitting *hakama* pants. Once these were fastened properly, she remembered that she would need to change into a sports bra before continuing with the *keikogi* jacket: she knew from experience that she would regret it if she didn't. While she knew that all the serious girls wore a traditional *sarashi* for this kind of practice, she could never manage to put one of those on by herself, and asking Tamao to help her wrap a long strip of cloth around her torso would probably not be the nicest thing she could do for the best friend who'd once crushed so hard on her, recent trip to an onsen notwithstanding.

She reached around to find the clasp of her bra, and as she did so, peeked over her shoulder to see if Tamao was watching. Before she could even chastise herself for this habitual glance, though, she felt a wave of concern for her friend and roommate.

Tamao, perched on the edge of her bed, was very much *not* watching her. Not only that, she was staring into space, eyes filled with tears that slowly dripped down to land on the uniform dress she had not yet removed. While she was crying, though, she did not look particularly sad. Instead, perhaps more unsettlingly, she looked completely numb.

Nagisa immediately forgot about unclasping and took a step toward her. "Tamao-chan… what is it? What's happened?"

"Tell me something, Nagisa-chan," Tamao whispered.

"Of course."

"When… when you met Kaori-sama, and saw her with Shizuma-sama… did it scare you?"

The question shocked Nagisa in its bluntness, and she suddenly found herself needing to sit down, so she settled onto the mattress beside Tamao. "It scared me a lot, Tamao-chan."

"Even though you knew that Kaori-sama didn't love her? *This* Kaori-sama, I mean?"

"It still scared me," Nagisa nodded. "It scared me to think of what seeing her was doing to Shizuma. Even knowing what I knew about this Kaori-sama and where her feelings were… how could I *not* be scared?"

"Are you *still* scared?" Tamao asked quietly.

"Well… Shizuma set me straight right away. She told me that her heart was mine, and that nothing would change that, and even if this *had* been her Kaori, it wouldn't have mattered: she wouldn't leave me, even then."

Still not looking at her, Tamao nodded slowly. "But… are you still scared?"

Nagisa let out a long sigh. "Of course I am. A little. Why… why is Tamao-chan asking me this?"

Finally, Tamao turned to look her in the eyes. "Because… I'm scared too, Nagisa-chan…"

Even in the midst of her ongoing rage, Kaname took the coward's way to her spar with Hazuki. Rather than risk running into any of the

kendo team in the locker room, she got dressed in her own room, then hauled her gear over to Spica at the appointed hour. Once she arrived at the gymnasium complex, she studiously avoided taking any halls that might be occupied with departing kendouka, or even (God help her) Kojima-sensei.

Cowardly, perhaps, but necessary. She had no idea what she'd say to anyone who questioned her presence there, and she had no desire to find out.

Once she arrived in the tertiary gym, which housed both kendo and now naginata practice, she was relieved to see Hazuki already there, dressed, and warming up with her practice polearm. Unfortunately, there were several others milling about as well, including that Nanto girl and her pink-haired pipsqueak protector. Kaname had really been hoping not to have an audience this time, but it couldn't be helped.

She set down her equipment bag some distance from Hazuki and began putting on her protective gear. She quickly finished the chest protector and gauntlets, and was wrapping the requisite small towel around her head when she noticed the shaft of a naginata entering her peripheral vision. She looked up to see Hazuki extending her a practice weapon, and Kaname, to her annoyance, realized that she had never even considered the fact that she did not own a naginata. She had been so focused on this spar that the small detail of not possessing the proper weapon had completely evaded her. "Thanks," she muttered, taking it from her sparring partner.

"Kaname, are you okay?" Hazuki asked, giving her a guardedly concerned look.

"No, not really," Kaname smiled tightly as she put on her sparring helmet. "Ask me again after we've had the chance to beat the crap out of each other for a while."

"Ever used one of these things before?"

Kaname hefted the naginata two-handed, then gave it a couple of quick sweeps and thrusts. "Not frequently, but I'm willing to spot you the extra expertise on this one." She then held it at the ready position and faced off with her former rival.

Hazuki mirrored her pose for a moment, then shook her head. "You know, empathy isn't my strongest skill, but even I can tell there's something bugging you. You sure you don't want to talk this over?"

"Nothing personal, Hazuki, but I'm sick of talking. Look… I need this, okay? We can talk later."

"I'll hold you to that."

They touched blades, then settled back. Kaname took a deep breath, willing that sense of Zen-like warrior calm to fill her.

After a few seconds in which it completely failed to do so, she gave it up for a lost cause and attacked.

It was a rarity that Nagisa found herself in the role of the comfort-giver with Tamao, but she found that she was grateful for the chance to return even a little of what her best friend had given to her over their time together. And so, with Tamao's head in her lap and her friend's long hair twined between her fingers, Nagisa listened to her story, only asking questions once it was finished.

"So… Hazuki-chan went to visit Naoko-sama in the Great Library, and when she gave her a hug, she… got excited?"

"I don't know if excited is the right word," Tamao sighed. "But… she said that all those old feelings came back to her. All the…" Tamao paused and swallowed hard. "All the… want, and desire."

"And it bothers Tamao-chan that Hazuki-chan felt desire for someone else," Nagisa nodded.

"I don't even know that it's as easy as that. We're teenagers, for Heaven's sake. At some level, we're *all* at the mercy of our hormones. I'd *expect* her to feel a rush when seeing someone as beautiful as Naoko-sama, especially given their history together, but…"

"But what?" Nagisa prompted her.

Tamao half-buried her face in the thick cloth of Nagisa's *hakama* . "I already lost one girl to a goddess. I don't want it to happen in a more literal sense."

"Tamao-chan," Nagisa sighed, patting her friend's head fondly.

"I'm sorry," Tamao went on. "I just needed to wallow for a moment."

"It's okay. But if Naoko-sama is really a goddess of some kind… well, don't you think that might have something to do with why Hazuki was so attracted to her originally?"

"But how," Tamao asked carefully, "could I ever compete with a goddess? What if Naoko-sama changes her mind one day, and wants Hazuki-chan for herself? How could I ever measure up to a literally deified first love?"

Nagisa actually managed a smile at that, and gave Tamao a gentle tap on the forehead. "Well, now you're just being silly."

"Nagisa-chan?" Tamao asked, looking up at her with a confused expression.

"Maybe I don't know the whole story as well as you do, but wasn't there something in there about how it could never work out for them *because of* Naoko-sama being a goddess? Besides, Hazuki-chan did the right thing, didn't she? She got all hormonal, but then true love took over, and she came home to you and Chikaru-sama."

"I know," Tamao sighed again. "I guess it's just hard not to feel… inadequate. How can I compete with a first love who was an angel?"

"I may not be the best person to ask," Nagisa chuckled, though there was not much humor to it. "Never mind Kaori-sama: I was scared that Miyuki-sama would try to steal Shizuma away for a while there, even though she explicitly said she wouldn't. I'm actually a really good authority on *feeling* inadequate, not overcoming it."

"I'm sorry, Nagisa-chan. I've reminded you of painful things, haven't I?"

"You're worth it."

"Does it get any easier? The being scared part, I mean?"

Nagisa thought about this for a while before answering. "Maybe a little, but… I don't think you have anything to be scared of. Not only did Hazuki-chan back away, but she came clean about the whole thing right away, didn't she?"

"True…"

Heartened by her friend's agreement, Nagisa forged ahead. "Like I told you a few weeks ago, I'm not a love sage who knows all the answers, but… I think Hazuki-chan is just doing what a lot of people do: she's having trouble fully getting over her first love. I've heard it plenty of times, how people just have a hard time letting go of that first special someone, and… and that a lot of people never really do. No matter what they do with their lives, no matter how hard they may fall in love again, there will always be that part that remembers what it was like with that first love, and just being around that person can sometimes lead to temptation, and… er…"

Quite suddenly, Nagisa remembered the person to whom she was saying this, and she found herself all too conscious of two facts: that said person's head was in her lap, and that she herself was still clad only in a bra from the waist up. She looked down uncertainly, only to

find Tamao smiling up at her, looking genuinely humored. "Well, when you put it *that* way…"

Nagisa blushed hotly. "Um, yes, well…"

Tamao sat up beside her, then gave her a slightly more weary version of her previous smile. "No, you're right. Forgive me for saying so, Nagisa-chan, but… you're right. Maybe that's why it was so hard to hear that from her: it hit too close to home."

"Do you…" Nagisa began, but then she paused, wondering if she should really ask this. "Do you still… um… think of me in that way, Tamao-chan?"

"Not so much anymore," Tamao smiled wanly. "There'll still be times when you do something so outrageously cute that I can't help remembering that part of last year, but…" She looked away. "A part of me will probably always wonder what might have been, and regret not confessing to you sooner, or never having had the chance to kiss you, but… like I said to Hazuki-chan months ago, I can live with that part."

"Then… can you live with that part of her, as well?"

Tamao's smile widened. "And here I thought you weren't an all-knowing love sage?"

"I'm… just a friend," Nagisa smiled back, blushing at the compliment.

"No," Tamao disagreed, shaking her head even as she continued smiling. "You're my Nagisa-chan. Thank you. I really do feel better, having talked about it."

Nagisa looked over at her bedside clock. "Well, then… should we hurry up and get changed? If… you still want to go to practice, that is?"

"Of course," Tamao nodded, hopping down from the bed and reaching beneath it to drag out her own equipment bag. "We'll probably be late, though, won't we?"

"I'll tell Hazuki-chan it was my fault," Nagisa shrugged, sticking out her tongue at her friend. She then went to open her wardrobe and find that sports bra she'd wanted earlier. Once she found one, she again reached around to unclasp the one she was wearing and slid it off her shoulders.

Something occurred to her then, and she paused before she could put the new garment on. "Tamao-chan?"

"Hmm?"

"Um… does it make you uncomfortable when I change clothes in front of you?"

"You're the one who had to put up with my obsessiveness last year. More importantly, does it make *you* uncomfortable?"

Nagisa thought about this for a moment, then made a decision, and slowly turned to face her friend. "No, not really."

As it turned out, the moment of trust went unheeded, as Tamao had her back turned while she continued unloading her equipment bag. "You're not worried that I'll see something I like and jump on it?"

"No, not really," Nagisa giggled. "But I don't want you to be… sad and regretful either. Or to feel guilty for looking."

"Maybe I need a little guilt," Tamao said in her familiar teasing voice, and Nagisa knew that they would both be just fine.

Letting the moment pass for now, she slipped on the tight stretch-top, then got into her *keikogi* . "Then maybe you could help me with the *sarashi* sometime?"

"Hmm, a difficult sacrifice, but I'm sure I could manage it for the sake of our friendship. I'll just have to…"

Tamao's voice cut off all of a sudden, and Nagisa turned to see her staring wide-eyed into space, her mouth hanging open in the shape of her last spoken word. "Tamao-chan? What is it?"

"Hazuki-chan..!" Tamao said in a strangled whisper, and when she turned to Nagisa, her eyes were green fire.

While the Zen feeling never came, Kaname quickly found another way to sharpen her focus: she finally took the lid off her anger and let it fly.

Only gay for lack of options, huh? Maybe she just hadn't met the right *man* yet, right? Sure, blame the school. Anything but accepting the reality that she might actually be what she said she was. What she *knew* she was.

Minutes into the spar, she had Hazuki completely on her heels. At least, that was how it looked: knowing her, she was probably *choosing* to stay on defense. After all, no one could really overpower the *legendary* Azuma Hazuki, with her warrior's wisdom and her inhuman reflexes. Or maybe Hazuki was just letting Kaname get it all out, playing the part of the metaphorical punching bag rather than providing a real challenge. For a moment, Kaname realized that she could choose to be grateful for that, but instead, she just let it piss her off even further.

More members of the naginata team were arriving in ones and twos. Hyper-aware of everything around her, Kaname noticed Chikaru among them, giving the two fighters a look of concern.

Because Chikaru was always concerned for everyone, wasn't she? Hell, Chikaru was perfection itself, just like her girlfriend here. Always the counselor, always the voice of reason… unless she was threatening to ruin you, of course, or gleefully collecting every rumor

she could find about you. So perfect that she had not one but *two* of Astraea's finest pieces of ass in her bed, and she couldn't deign to tap them. So wise that she could plant an idea in your head and let it grow like a vine, choking you from the inside.

So tell me, Kaname, are you *really* gay, or did a bad, bad man just *make* you that way?

A bad, bad man whose face still filled her nightmares, along with the look of shattered horror on the face of the son… Her future husband, eh? My, what a functional family *that* would be! And even better, it would be a boost to her social standing! Yay! And she could have tawdry affairs with Momomi while popping out heirs for Saiga's "family business." Hey, maybe she'd even have daughters! No doubt grandpa would *love* to babysit them… once they reached a certain age, of course…

Or she could always hook up with Lilith, right? Night after night of soul-bending sex with a goddess was certainly an appealing idea… at least until Kaname did something to piss her off, and had her entire existence erased around her while she was left to enjoy the feeling of there being absolutely nothing left of the life she knew…

She continued to rain blows from all directions, each of them blocked expertly by Hazuki, whose naginata was a blur in her hands. Kaname's *Souma* was burning hotter than ever, and the tension was building toward the breaking point inside her. That volcano was getting ready to pop.

With a flash of what was almost humor, she briefly pondered the obvious sexual subtext, and wondered if Hazuki knew that Kaname was, in a very real sense, having her way with the younger girl.

Because forcing herself on another was what she was good at, right?

Blindsided by that thought, she felt herself completely snap, and she gave a harsh bellow as she swung her naginata in a left-to-right arc

that seemed to bend the light around it as it passed. Her *Souma* exploded inside her, and it was not something orgasmic, or triumphant: it was a complete loss of herself, as the searing heat stripped her of everything that she was, and everything that she felt. There was nothing left but the weapon, and the weapon was her.

Loud as thunder, Kaname heard two distinct cracks. The first came when her blow split Hazuki's naginata in half as her opponent attempted to block. The second came when that same blow struck Hazuki at the base of her helmet, right where shoulder met neck, and her head snapped sideways with the force of it.

Almost in slow motion, Hazuki collapsed to the gymnasium floor. Kaname was distantly aware of screams, and approaching footsteps, but all she could really perceive at that moment was Hazuki lying there motionless, with her neck bent at an angle that human necks are simply *not* supposed to bend.

Just like that, the erupting lava within her was gone, and Kaname felt very cold indeed.

Next: Recoil

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This chapter was going to be a lot longer, but I chose to split things here because it's been six freaking months, and I seldom indulge in a good cliffhanger. Kanpai!

Recoil

Are you my ally or my enemy

Do you have self-loathing or empathy

Can you keep me in your prayers, sister

Can you keep me in there somewhere, and sister

If you ain't got nothin' good to say

Don't say nothin' at all

-Indigo Girls

Part 11: Recoil

Chikaru was on her feet and dashing forward even before Hazuki could complete her collapse to the padded gymnasium floor. Her dear one had not cried out upon being struck, at least verbally, but her *Souma* had positively screamed at the impact of Kaname's naginata. Chikaru had to force back the wave of chill that swept through her as even from this distance she felt Hazuki's energy rapidly leaving her body.

Kneeling quickly beside the fallen girl, Chikaru assessed the damage at a glance. It was all too obvious from this close that Hazuki's neck was broken, but it wasn't until Chikaru was able to unbuckle her chest protector and place her hand against the still warm skin of the other girl's shoulder that she felt just how bad things were. Shattered vertebrae, and massive damage to the spinal cord: not a complete severing, but enough to stop her heart and lungs cold. Worse yet, her *Souma* was hissing out of her, rising like steam from her fallen

form, and Chikaru could feel its warmth against her face as it escaped.

Even though she knew that this was precisely the wrong thing to do, she realized that time was short, and that as with so many things, the normal rules did not apply to either of them, so she quickly stripped Hazuki of her helmet, straightening her shattered neck in the process.

" *Minamoto-san, what are you doing?!"* came a voice from close by, as Kojima-sensei knelt opposite her. "For God's sake, don't move her!"

"I know what I'm doing, sensei," she said with more confidence than she actually felt. "I just need space. Please try to keep the others from crowding us." She then placed her hand at the base of Hazuki's throat and concentrated.

Her love's energy was making a valiant attempt to help her body recover by rushing to the area of the trauma and accelerating her healing, just as it did for any lesser injury, but the damage was simply too great, and Hazuki's *Souma* was not geared toward healing to the extent that Chikaru knew her own was. This in mind, she let her essence flow through the connection between them, trying not only to repair the damage, but to prevent any more of Hazuki's *Souma* from escaping. The first was difficult enough, but the latter was proving to be all but impossible, and Hazuki's own source of *Souma* was sputtering weakly with the effort. Time was very short.

" *Everybody stand back!"* Kojima-sensei shouted then, as a few brave souls among the club started moving in to try to get a look at what was happening. "Give her room to breathe, dammit!"

On the periphery, Chikaru was suddenly aware that Kaname was kneeling beside her. She had removed her helmet as well, and her skin was deathly pale and her eyes wide and glazed. "You're… you're healing her?"

"Yes, and you're helping," Chikaru snapped, reaching out with her free hand. She snaked it around the back of Kaname's neck and pulled her in closer, making skin-to-skin contact in the process. There was no time to ask politely, so she reached into the other girl and started pulling *Souma* . She felt Kaname reflexively resist at first, but then, perhaps sensing what was going on, she let go and allowed Chikaru to take what she needed. Chikaru would have liked to merge their sources, multiplying their energy in the process, but given that this generally caused a wave of *Souma* to sweep the immediate area (possibly even visible to the untrained eye), she did not dare try this yet. If things got desperate, of course, all bets were off, but as it was there was still a good chance that they could save Hazuki without revealing their secrets to the entire club.

Hang in there, my love, she whispered along the waves of energy passing between them. There was no reply, at least not in words, but she all but felt Hazuki's soul feebly caressing her own: even as hurt as she was, she was trying to assure Chikaru that she was still there, and still fighting. With this touch, the older girl felt her resolve double yet again. There was no way in Earth or Heaven that she was going to let her dear one slip away.

"Minamoto-san, she's not breathing," Kojima-sensei said flatly.

"I know, sensei," she nodded, keeping her mind on task.

"Minamoto-san, either do something or move out of the way so I can!" the instructor barked.

"I've got this, sensei," she said through gritted teeth, struggling to keep her voice quiet enough to not be overheard by the crowd. "Just trust me for a few moments more. She's not as hurt as she looks." The last part was largely a lie, but she needed to buy time for the *Souma* to do its work. Three floods of energy - one of fire, one of water, and one of something warm and thick like blood - converged on the spot of the injury, fusing bone, healing tissue and, most painfully of all, stitching together the lacerated nerves. It was agony for both of them, but there was no turning back now.

Suddenly, Hazuki gave a violent twitch and took a huge, gasping breath. The unexpected motion nearly made Chikaru lose hold of her, but she kept her hand where it was and continued acting as the conduit between their three flows of energy. With a thrill of relief, she felt a pulse beneath her fingertips as Hazuki's body continued to fight. Just like that, the energy that had been leaking from her ceased its egress, and her source went from a flicker to a weak but steady outpour. Chikaru relaxed the pull on Kaname then, and let her hand slip from the other girl's neck.

"Looks like she just had the wind knocked out of her," Chikaru said in a louder voice, giving what she hoped was a convincing sigh of relief. "There may be some concussion, of course."

"We'll get her to the infirmary," Kojima-sensei nodded. She then turned a steely gaze on Kaname. "Well don't just sit there, dammit! Go get a stretcher!"

"Right," Kaname said in a broken whisper as she rose from her crouched position, still staring down at Hazuki. After a few moments, she tore her eyes away and took off running.

At that moment, it was as though the entire room let out the breath it had been holding, and the air became filled with soft, concerned voices as the gathered members of *Kachou Kamen* at turns wept, reassured and worried.

The rush of adrenaline was beginning to wear off, but Chikaru kept her hand at the base of Hazuki's throat, still sharing as much energy as she could. They were past the worst of it, but Chikaru could tell that Hazuki was still in excruciating pain. As best she could, she bade her friend to let herself rest and heal. There was no need for her to come back to consciousness yet: not until it became something closer to bearable.

Chikaru opened her eyes then to see that Kojima-sensei was still crouched opposite her, and was giving her a searching look. "Minamoto-san," she said, pitching her voice quietly enough that only

Chikaru would hear, "you *must* realize that I won't be satisfied without a *damned* good explanation for whatever the hell just happened."

"Yes, sensei, I realize that," she nodded, meeting the instructor's steady gaze with one of her own.

In spite of Kojima-sensei's explicit instructions for the rest of the naginata team to get dressed and return to their dorms, most of them only complied with the first of these instructions before making their way variously toward the infirmary in a somber procession of twos and threes. One such trio came in the form of an unnaturally quiet Kizuna, Remon and Kagome.

At least, thought Remon, the Kizuna part of the silence was unnatural. She was used to Kagome being quiet, but Kizuna looked positively shell-shocked as they crossed the campus together. "Hey, Kizuna-chan," Remon said quietly, desperate to fill the space somehow.

Her roommate did not answer: she merely walked on, wringing her hands. Remon took a deep breath and sighed. "She'll be okay, Kizuna-chan," she tried to assure the other girl. "Hazuki-senpai's as tough as they come."

"What if it's my fault?" Kizuna asked suddenly.

Remon blinked twice, then shook her head quickly. "Wait, what? How could this be *your* fault?"

Kizuna turned wild eyes toward her. "Maybe it's because of the honk," she said in a low, tremulous voice. "It might have put her off her game. Maybe while they were fighting, she saw me, and remembered the honk, and it distracted her long enough to…"

"To what?" Remon frowned. "Kizuna-chan, unless you can think of a legitimate cause-effect relationship between a boob grab and a

broken naginata, I call bullsh!t. Now stop it."

They walked on in continued silence, though Remon noticed that Kagome had taken Kizuna's hand.

"She took a pretty hard hit," Kizuna said at length. "I hope she doesn't lose her memory."

Remon rolled her eyes. "Now you're just being ridiculous."

The waiting area of the infirmary was generally not meant to hold more than half a dozen people, but somehow the members of *Kachou Kamen* managed it. Other than Chikaru and Kojima-sensei, no one else was allowed to join the nurse and patient in the medical suite, at least until a panicked-looking Tamao and Nagisa arrived, and Tamao was almost immediately brought inside. No one saw fit to question this.

Kaname remained in the waiting room, sitting with her head bowed, staring fixedly at the floor. Part of her wondered if she should have stayed with the others at Hazuki's side, but it just didn't feel like her place. Hadn't she done enough already? Chikaru obviously had things in hand, and with Tamao there now, they'd probably be using some of their coven magic to fix everything while the adults marveled at the speed of the recovery.

At least, Kaname hoped this was what was happening. She didn't want to consider the alternative: that she had maimed or crippled someone who had, in spite of everything, become perhaps the truest friend Kaname had ever known. She thought back to the previous semester, and the endless string of dark thoughts she'd directed at her perceived enemy. Was she belatedly getting her wish? Had part of her wanted this after all?

As though reading her mind, a voice cut through her reverie. "So! *Now* are you satisfied?"

Kaname looked up to see Yaya standing in front of her, arms crossed and feet planted in a defiant stance. She was accustomed to seeing hostility from the girl by this time, but the expression Yaya wore here was nothing short of murderous. Tsubomi stood beside and slightly behind her, with one hand on her senpai's sleeve. "Yeah, I'm talking to you," Yaya snarled. "Are you happy now?"

"Do I *look* happy?" Kaname heard herself say.

"Yaya-senpai, please," Tsubomi whispered, pulling on the older girl's arm. "Not here."

Yaya, however, either didn't hear her *kohai,* or simply didn't care. "Don't you *dare* give me that distressed act," she frowned, shaking her head. "You wanted this all along, and you *know* it. You may have everyone else fooled - hell, you may even have Hazuki-senpai fooled - but not me. I know what you are."

"Well, that's great, Nanto-san," Kaname sighed, returning her gaze to the floor. "Since you've got it all figured out, maybe you could clue *me* in sometime."

" *Don't look away from me!"* Yaya shrieked, and now both Tsubomi and Nagisa were restraining her. "You just won't quit until you ruin everything, *will you?* "

"Yaya-senpai, you should stop now," came a tiny voice, and a small hand appeared on Kaname's knee.

Just like that, everything *did* stop, as all eyes went to the diminutive form of Kagome, who was now sitting at Kaname's side. The Lulim second-year was staring unblinkingly at Yaya, whose face was now a mask of shock.

Her voice barely over a whisper, Kagome continued. "Can't you see that she's hurt, too?"

There was a long, thick silence, and then Yaya shrugged off Tsubomi and Nagisa and stalked away across the small waiting room. Kaname looked to the tiny girl sitting beside her, uncertain of which surprised her more: that someone had come to her defense at all, or that it was Byakudan Effing Kagome. For her part, Kagome patted Kaname's knee and stared at her expressionlessly.

The tense silence did not last for long, though, as the door leading to the patient rooms opened, and Chikaru, Tamao and Kojima-sensei stepped out into the waiting room. Chikaru looked around at the assembled group and smiled wearily. "She's going to be fine," the Lulim president said without preamble. After pausing to let the room sigh with relief, she went on. "The nurse wants her to stay here overnight, just to be safe, but she's all but recovered already. There doesn't appear to be any concussion or nerve damage." Here, her smile deepened. "And of course, being who she is, she wanted to make sure to turn this into a teachable moment, so she asked me to remind you all that this is why you need to *always* be aware of the condition of your equipment."

"Now do like I told you before and go to your dorms, damn it," Kojima-sensei growled. "Go on, shoo. Clear out."

Murmuring quietly to one another as they went, the team members did as their sensei asked and slowly filtered out of the room. Kagome gave Kaname's knee one last gentle pat before she joined Remon and Kizuna, and Kaname was vaguely aware of Nagisa and Tsubomi very deliberately placing themselves between her and Yaya as the three of them left together.

Kaname herself made no move to leave, though. All she could do was sit there, once more staring fixedly at the tiled floor.

Hazuki was going to be okay. Kaname knew that she should be relieved, but she was too numb for even that. Maybe she'd just stay here until they threw her out; at least then she wouldn't have to deal with any of the others. She didn't think she could face Chikaru or Tamao right now.

As was so often the case, though, Chikaru had other plans. She knelt before Kaname and took her hands, making a point to put herself into the older girl's field of vision. "She wants to see you," Chikaru said quietly, and a wave of *Souma* came through their joined hands. At this, Kaname looked up and met Chikaru's eyes. There was neither reproach nor accusation in her expression, and in some ways that was almost worse. Behind her, Tamao still looked rattled, but she seemed to be calming down.

When Kaname said nothing in reply, Chikaru squeezed her hands again, then stood up, put her arm around Tamao's waist, and ushered the younger girl toward the door.

"Minamoto-san," Kojima-sensei called after her, "I'm still going to need an explanation. You know that."

"I know, sensei," Chikaru replied. "And you'll have one, I promise."

Kaname watched them go, then once again hung her head. Hazuki wanted to see her? Somehow the idea of speaking to Hazuki was more terrifying than facing an army of dragons had been. What could she say?

After a long silence, Kaname realized that she was still not alone in the room. "So are you going to try to make me feel like crap too?" she asked.

"No," Kojima-sensei replied. "It looks like you've got that pretty well covered on your own. Azuma-kun doesn't blame you, for what it's worth, and neither do I."

"You don't?" Kaname asked, eyes going wide as she looked up at her former teacher.

The kendo sensei was staring at her, arms crossed. "No, Kenjō-kun, if there's anyone to blame for what happened today, it's me."

Kaname blinked at the woman in disbelief. "What?"

"Tell me something, Kenjō-kun. Do you know the real reason I dropped you from the kendo team?"

"For being a pain in the ass once too often?"

The sensei shook her head. "Because you were dangerous," she said in a hard voice. "Whenever you fought, it was something primal. You didn't just want to win: you wanted to *destroy* . You had *zero* discipline. As good as you were in competition, I knew I had to do something, because it was only a matter of time before someone got hurt, and hurt badly."

She stopped for a moment, as if waiting for Kaname to say something, but when no reply came, she went on. "At that time, I had a choice: I could do things the easy way or the hard way. I could kick you off the team, or I could do my goddamned *job* and make sure you *learned* something about how much is at stake every time you cross weapons with someone. I could try to teach that loose cannon a little bit about respect and discipline before she did something she'd have reason to regret."

Kaname stared at the woman, not certain she could believe what she was hearing.

"To my shame," Kojima-sensei continued, "I took the easy way, and decided that I just didn't want you to be my problem any longer. Today we saw what a good idea *that* was, didn't we?"

"I…" Kaname started, but she could not find any words.

"Fortunately, it looks like maybe you're starting to figure it out now," Kojima-sensei nodded, "and no one had to die for our mistakes. Yet. But something has to change, Kenjō-kun. Since this is going to go on record as an accident, I can't discipline you or force you into anything, but… I hope you'll think *damned* hard about what happened today, and I hope you'll give me a chance to make up for releasing you into the wild too soon. You know where my office is."

Kaname nodded slowly, still too numb to speak.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to give an official report to the administrators. No doubt *this* will be an exercise in creativity…"

Upon leaving the infirmary, Tamao found herself adrift: it was as though the combination of terror and relief had left her incapable of choosing her next action. She allowed herself to be steered back to the dormitory, and after a blurry sequence of images found herself in the safety of Chikaru's room. Here, she was gently guided to sit at her dear friend's desk while Chikaru herself crossed the small space to her wardrobe and began removing her fighting garb.

Tamao watched unblinkingly as the loose *hakama* pants slipped from Chikaru's legs and pooled at her feet, followed by the traditional long-sleeved jacket, leaving her dressed only in panties and a *sarashi* . Nagisa-chan had said something about a *sarashi* not long ago, hadn't she? It was difficult to remember for some reason.

Chikaru's deft fingers found where it was fastened, and the long strip of cloth binding her breasts quickly unraveled, falling in a spiral around her before joining the rest of the outfit on the floor. As Tamao went on staring, Chikaru stepped clear of the pile of cloth, then picked it up and tossed it into a hamper before opening her wardrobe and reaching for a clean uniform.

Somehow, Tamao found herself objecting to this course of action, though she could not articulate why, even to herself. "Chikaru," she called softly.

Fearless as ever, Chikaru turned to Tamao, making no effort to cover herself. "Yes, my darling?"

The tightness of the *sarashi* had left crisscrossing lines on her skin. For a moment Tamao could only continue to stare, while Chikaru waited patiently for a reply. "What are you doing?" Tamao asked at last.

"It's time for dinner, Tamao-chan," Chikaru reminded her. "I can't very well go to the dining hall in kendo attire."

Dinner. Tamao had completely forgotten about this. The standard Monday routine had become naginata practice, then a shower, then dinner. But that was only on normal days. "I'm not hungry," she said softly, though this was not entirely true.

Chikaru gave her a lopsided smile. "Neither am I, to be honest. Poor thing, you look exhausted. Shall we stay in, then?"

"Please," Tamao nodded. There was something else, though. Who had she just been thinking about? "Nagisa-chan," she said slowly. "I should tell Nagisa-chan where I am."

Chikaru hung up her uniform, took out a pullover shirt and flannel pajama pants instead, then handed a second set of bedclothes to Tamao. "She already knows, my sweet. Don't you remember? She told us she'd be spending the evening with Yaya-chan to try to calm her down, and then she asked me to take care of you."

Distantly, Tamao found herself proud of her Nagisa-chan: that was a surprising but welcome choice. Mature, even. It seemed a shame not to remember such a moment. Not that she could remember much of anything at this point: for some reason her mind was still awash with images of a glassy-eyed Hazuki pleading with her not to worry, and of an almost naked Chikaru who was now inexplicably covering up that lovely skin even as Tamao watched.

When Tamao made no move to get changed, Chikaru wordlessly pulled her to her feet, helped her out of her uniform and into pajamas, and then hung up the uniform on the door of her wardrobe. She then guided the both of them into her bed, where they settled beside one another, and for Tamao this was quite possibly the only thing all day that had made any sense at all.

For a long while, Kaname remained in the waiting room, not so much considering her next move as avoiding it. Eventually, though, she slowly rose to her feet, took a deep breath, and went through the door to the nurse's station. The woman in question was sitting at her desk, scribbling notes. She looked up to see Kaname, narrowed her eyes for a moment, then pointed to one of the doors to the patient rooms. Kaname nodded thanks, and then after taking yet another steadying breath, she went inside and closed the door behind her.

Hazuki had been allotted one of the more advanced rooms: rather than a simple cot, this one had an adjustable hospital-style bed, upon which the tall girl was lying in a semi-reclined position. Several wires snaked out from inside her gown, hooked up to machines which monitored her vital signs. Her eyes had been closed at first, but as Kaname stepped closer to the bed, they opened, and gradually focused on her.

For a long time they just looked at one another, but then Hazuki licked her lips and spoke in a rough voice. "Are you okay, Kaname?"

With those words, Kaname felt a familiar rush of annoyance, which at least gave her something to stand on. "Oh, for f*cksake, Hazuki, I just *broke your goddamned neck*, and you're asking if *I'm* okay? I think I liked it better when you hated my guts."

Hazuki frowned. "Would that help?"

"Maybe," Kaname snorted. "Could you at least have the decency to be mad at me?"

"Sure, one second," Hazuki nodded. She took a breath, then briefly bared her teeth. "Grr. Angry Hazuki is angry. Is that better? I'd give you more, but I'm afraid I'm on some pretty heavy-duty painkillers at the moment, and my *Souma* hasn't quite burned them off yet."

Kaname pulled up a chair by the bedside and sat down. "You're really not mad, are you?" she asked wonderingly.

"To be honest, I'm just glad you didn't hit me in the head. If they'd had to shave any of my hair off… well, *that* might have been unforgivable."

"Yeah, I don't think the butch look would suit you," Kaname smirked. She felt the expression fade, however. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"Actually, there is," Hazuki replied. She then turned a dulled smile on her recent sparring partner. " *Now* will you tell me what's bothering you?"

Kaname looked down and saw that she was pulling nervously at her fingers, so she clasped her hands to stop herself. "That's… a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Hazuki. "The nurse has my vitals on a monitor at her desk, and I'm not due for any more drugs, so until the shift change, we've got nothing but time here."

"Nothing but time," Kaname repeated softly. She wasn't sure how much she was willing to say to Hazuki, but she knew she needed to try. She owed the other girl that much, at least. "Tell me something."

"Sure."

"When did…" Kaname broke off, collected herself, then continued. "When did you figure out you were gay?"

Hazuki looked confused by the question, but answered all the same. "That… actually depends on which Hazuki you mean. The me from this world never really figured it out so much as lived in fear of the possibility. The me from elsewhere… well, I was fourteen, and Hatsumi and I were out watching the cherry blossoms fall. Kind of on an impulse, I hugged her, and… it was a thunderbolt moment. That was when I knew that I wanted more from her. I still didn't know *what* I wanted, exactly, but I knew it was more than sisters could have, adopted or not."

"Fell in love under the falling cherry blossoms, eh?" Kaname smirked again. "How very yuri of you."

"Well, I *am* a terrible lesbian, but I guess I had to make *some* concessions to the cliché. What in the world does this have to do with your so-called large amounts of suppressed rage, though?"

Kaname paused, again wondering how much she could allow herself to say. "Did you… ever have cause to… *doubt* being gay?"

"I… can't think of any sudden attraction to men, if that's what you mean."

"No, I mean… did you ever wonder if you were… I don't know, *forced* into being the way you are?" She immediately regretted the words, but there was no calling them back.

To her surprise, though, Hazuki pondered this for a moment, then nodded slowly. "The thought crossed my mind once in a while, sure. Kaname, the object of my affections was a self-described fertility goddess. After I found out what she was, there were plenty of times I found myself wondering if living with her had… made me equate that kind of love with femininity."

"Do you still wonder?" Kaname asked.

Hazuki shook her head a tiny amount, which appeared to be all she could manage at the moment. "Not since I came to this world. That may be one of the only good things about having two sets of memories: I don't just have my experiences with Hatsumi to fall back on. Based on what I went through in this world, it's pretty clear to me that I was never meant to be anything other than a lesbian."

Kaname nodded slowly, but then felt a chill as she remembered the description of Hazuki's self from this world, up to and including her suicide. Not for the first time, she wondered how anyone could live with those memories, and not for the first time, she remembered having taunted Hazuki with details of that past.

"Why are you asking these things, Kaname?" Hazuki said gently.

"Idle curiosity?" she replied, trying to sound flippant and failing.

"Look, even without the painkillers, I'm hardly in Chikaru's league here when it comes to coaxing things out. Just tell me what's going on."

Kaname looked up to meet Hazuki's eyes. "My father is trying to set me up in an arranged marriage with his boss's son."

"Oh," Hazuki said quietly. "Um… that's… interesting." A look of numbed shock then crossed her face. "Oh! Are you saying that… this is making *you* have doubts?"

Right conclusion, wrong reason. "Okay, before we go any further, let me just make something clear: I'm every bit of me a vagitarian. The only way you'll ever find a c*ck inside me is if I bite the f*cking thing off and swallow it whole."

Hazuki looked a bit taken aback, which actually made Kaname's smirk return. "Sorry, was that too much for your delicate ears?"

"Oh, no, I was just picturing what the x-ray would look like," Hazuki mused. "I liked the way you referred to it as 'the f*cking thing,' though. Very *apropos* ."

"Thanks."

"Not such a happy thought for your prospective husband, though, is it?"

"I'm not going to marry him," Kaname said forcefully. "That's not even a question, and I've already told my father so."

"Does he know that you're..?" Hazuki asked, making an idle gesture with one hand.

"He does now," Kaname snorted.

"Ah. I'm guessing he didn't take it well?"

"Not particularly. He blamed the school, and threatened to pull me out. I told him what he could do with his threats, and that was that."

Hazuki nodded along with the explanation, then narrowed her eyes slightly. "Except that *wasn't* that, was it?"

"No," Kaname sighed, looking down at her hands again. She then gave a rueful laugh. "You know, if anyone told me a couple months ago that I'd be talking to you about girlfriend troubles one day, I'd have told them to get themselves committed."

"What does Momomi have to do with it?" Hazuki asked, arching her eyebrows.

Kaname looked up at her and smiled mirthlessly. "She thinks I should do it."

"Do it? You mean, get married?"

"Yeah. She said that this is what we're destined for anyway, so if it's a chance to move up in the world, I should go for it, and let her be my mistress."

There was a long silence as Hazuki processed this. "I'm… not sure what to say."

"I guess it's what I deserve, really," Kaname said quietly. "It's not like I ever gave her any reason to think we were… meant to be permanent."

"It's not just going to be that, though," said Hazuki. "You know as well as I do what society expects of us. We're supposed to use one another for practice, and then grow up to turn our attention to men… just like God and nature intended." She gave a little smirk of her own as she said the last part, though the reference was lost on Kaname. "Maybe… Momomi just buys into that crap more than you and I do."

She left the rest unsaid, but Kaname could all but hear it anyway. *Maybe Momomi's just using you for practice after all.*

"I can see how it would hurt to hear that, though," Hazuki added after a pause.

"I'm not even mad at *her*, though," Kaname sighed. "If she knew what I know, she never would have said that."

"Then… what doesn't she know?" Hazuki asked delicately.

Kaname found that she was pulling at her fingers again. If she said this, there was no going back. Was she really willing to tell Hazuki something she hadn't told *anyone* else, *particularly* Momomi?

Before she could think about it any further, she spoke. "When I was nine years old, my father's boss raped me."

It was a long time before Hazuki said anything in reply. When she did, her voice was unnaturally calm. "Tell me, is this man still alive? Because that can be remedied."

It came as no surprise to Chikaru that sleep eluded her completely. As traumatic as the previous hours had been, and as much as her metaphysical efforts had been a strain, it was nonetheless early in the evening yet, and somehow the motion of that much *Souma* had charged her up more than it had drained her. Besides, it gave her the chance to focus on Tamao, and the slow, gentle exchange of energy between them: so different from the push and pull of the earlier healing.

Healing. No one was more shocked than Chikaru that those efforts had been as successful as they had. She had known (or at least guessed) for some time now that such applications of her energy were possible, at least in theory, but to have actually done it? And to have done it with so much at stake?

Truth be told, the implications were a little scary. Even if, as she suspected, she would only be able to affect those who already had *Souma* of their own, the sheer responsibility of it was… well, it was a lot different than being a wise counsel and a shoulder to cry on.

Rather than think about this, then, she returned her attention to Tamao. The younger girl was lying on her side, with her face nuzzled against Chikaru's shoulder and one hand draped across her middle, tucked just under the hem of her shirt: it was from this connection that their *Souma* flowed. Tamao had been a bit fidgety, as though having nightmares, and would periodically snuggle even closer, as much as that was even possible at this stage.

Then, accompanied by a murmur that sounded a lot like "Hazuki-chan," that hand began to move. As Chikaru watched (and felt) with what was almost a detached interest, Tamao's warm fingers glided along the lines of her lower ribs, then crept upward, until two fingertips brushed against the underside of her breast. Here, they stopped, and Chikaru wondered if they would be content with that.

Moments later, she got her answer. With fingers followed by palm, Tamao's hand gently closed over Chikaru's breast. Tamao herself smiled sleepily and made an "mmm" noise, and her face nuzzled even closer.

Well, then. It definitely wasn't the first time that someone had gone for the handful, but unless Chikaru was mistaken, this was the first time it had been skin to skin. She couldn't fault Tamao for seeking a bit of comfort after everything that had happened, certainly, though this was bold even for her. Nonetheless, she seemed content to simply rest her hand there and give the occasional gentle squeeze.

Nothing wrong with that.

After a few moments, though, those fingers began moving again, tracing first along the edges, and then making a slow spiral inward. She was barely grazing Chikaru's skin with her her fingertips now,

and it was clear that she was no longer looking for comfort, but for a reaction.

As curious as she was to see what might come next, Chikaru decided it would be in both of their best interests to put a stop to this now. "Tamao-chan," she said gently, "I know you're not really asleep."

The hand immediately stopped.

In spite of herself, Kaname nearly laughed at Hazuki's implied threat. "Believe me, the thought of offing the old bastard has crossed my mind more than once."

"Does your father know that this happened?" Hazuki asked. "There's no way he would have proposed this if he knew, is there?"

Kaname looked up at Hazuki, finding herself darkly curious to see how she would react to the next part. "Oh, he knows about it. See, he set the whole thing up. He got a big fat promotion, and ol' Saiga got to fulfill his lolicon fantasies. It was a win-win situation. Saiga even made his son watch, so at least my future husband will know why I'm not a virgin."

For a moment, Hazuki went pale, and almost looked like she might throw up, but then her mouth set into a thin, hard line. "Right. Okay, patricide is a big deal, I get that. How about I just break his arms and legs?"

"You sure know how to cheer a girl up," Kaname deadpanned.

A look of concentration peeked through the stormcloud that was Hazuki's face. "Saiga… I feel like I should know that name…"

Kaname shook her head. "He's not your problem, and neither is my father. Look, I appreciate the support, but they're mine to deal with."

"I beg to differ," Hazuki scowled. "Fine, the suppressed rage makes a lot more sense now, but… if today was an example of how you intend to 'deal with' it?" She indicated the vital sign monitors, then tugged gently on one of the electrodes adhered to her chest. "You're going to have a hard time convincing me that it's not *my* problem, too."

"Look, I'm sorry for…" Kaname all but shouted, but she quickly deflated as she considered how ridiculously inadequate it sounded. Sorry for breaking your neck? Oops, my bad?

Hazuki seemed to deflate a little as well: she had been sitting up in the bed, but now she sank back into the pillows. Her face took on a curious, intent expression, and she raised her right hand and peered at it closely. She flexed her fingers very slightly, and looked at them like she'd never seen them before.

"What?" Kaname asked, simply.

"Not sure. Must be muscle memory of some kind."

"Wanting to grab your sword, eh?" Kaname chuckled.

"Didn't feel like a sword," Hazuki said, shaking her head slightly. She then lowered her hand back to the sheets and turned to Kaname, this time with a look of slowly dawning realization. "So… what you were saying earlier, about realizing when you were gay, and wondering if something made you that way? This was what you were talking about, wasn't it?"

Kaname let out another short, annoyed sigh. "Yeah. I mean, talk about your bad lesbian clichés, right? Raped and traumatized as a little girl, she grew up to be a man-hating lesbo. It almost sounds like a propaganda piece, doesn't it?"

"And you hate the idea that anyone could have *made* you gay, especially like *that* ." Hazuki did not say it as a question, and for a

moment Kaname found herself strangely impressed that the other girl had hit upon it so succinctly.

She considered nodding along and letting this be the end of the soul-baring, but somehow hearing the words spoken by someone else just made it clear how hollow they were. "That's the thing, though. I don't think anyone *made me* queer. I just… like women too much for it to have been that. I like everything about them. The look, the form, the feel… I mean… when you hugged Naoko-sama, and the light went on in your head… it was like it was meant to be that way, right? Like holding another girl was the most natural, perfect thing in the world, and you couldn't imagine ever wanting anything else. Right?" She looked up at Hazuki almost desperately, hoping the other girl would understand.

To her relief, Hazuki nodded. "That pretty much describes it, yeah."

"So… even if they *did* push me this way, somehow? Even if they somehow 'made' me want girls instead? Fine. In a totally f*cked-up way, they introduced me to something good, and I'll never look back. I am *not* going to grow out of this. So… the idea that anyone could turn me into a dyke… Hell, if that's true, they did me a *favor* . That's not the part that freaks me out. That's not what… scares me."

They were on the precipice now, and Kaname realized that if Hazuki asked the next question, she might not be able to answer it.

Unsurprisingly, Hazuki did so. "Then what scares you?"

That I let what they did turn me into the kind of person who could do those things to Hikari…

She couldn't do it. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Instead, she told a different truth. "That they made me into someone who can't cope with her anger. Someone who got herself kicked off the kendo team for being out of control. Someone who tried to 'deal with' it with a weapon in her hands, and ended up breaking her

friend's neck." Too late, she realized she'd used the f-word, but with everything else she was admitting to, that felt pretty minor.

Hazuki studied her carefully for a moment, then took the conversation in a direction Kaname could not have expected. "The *Souma* we have, you and I… it's different from the others'. You know about that, right?"

"The Guardian thing, yeah," Kaname nodded.

"Right. But… did you know that there's another name for what we are?"

"Um… no? What is it?"

Hazuki smiled, but there was no humor in it. "The *Yami* ."

In spite of her customary bravado, Kaname could not suppress a shudder. "Darkness?"

"Exactly. Technically, the original *Yami* is long gone, and whichever Keeper wears his hat at any given time is the acting *Yami*, but… that's what you and I are, as well, along with everyone else who has our kind of *Souma* . And it's a damned fitting name, because every one of us has a dark side. We *have* to. We may be angels, in a sense, but… you said it yourself, once: someone has to do the dirty work."

"Oh, please. You? A dark side?"

"Do you think I was kidding when I talked about breaking your father's limbs earlier?" Hazuki asked, simply.

Kaname almost cracked wise, but then she saw the look on Hazuki's face. There was cold steel in those blue eyes, and Kaname was uncomfortably reminded of how many times she'd seen that look in the past. "Then you're a lot better at controlling it than I am," she said

quietly, wondering how frequently she herself had given Hazuki cause to hold back.

"I have my moments," Hazuki said darkly, and this time she was the one who looked away. "Ask me about the Universal Garden sometime. Trust me; I've hit bottom more than once. I know all too well how dangerous it is to not take my *Souma* seriously."

At those words, Kaname found herself reminded of Kaori and Lilith, and she hoped that Hazuki was doing a good job teaching that lesson to Tamao.

"Anyway," Hazuki sighed, making a show of moving on with the conversation, "I'm not sure how much I can do, but if you need any advice, I hope you'll ask me."

"You know… Kojima-sensei talked to me before I came in, and… I can't be sure, but it sounded like she was offering to help."

"She probably was, then. She's been working with me, too. Maybe you should join us sometime?"

"You… you still want to spar with me?" Kaname asked, genuinely surprised by this.

"Well, sure, from a practicing-martial-arts point of view, or even a taking-out-aggressions thing to a degree. However…" She grimaced. "I'll sleep better tonight knowing that I'm not the one who made you angry enough to kill today, but… the sooner you learn to channel that, the better. It's one thing when we're fighting dragons, but…"

Kaname snorted, getting some of that bravado back. "You think we'll ever get to fight dragons again?" she asked.

"Well… I don't know about *dragons*, but… I've already volunteered to help with whatever it is that snuck into the Great Library while they were dealing with Kaori-san."

"Oh, really?"

"Mmm hmm. I guess you could say I'm on call."

"… And you'll come find me as soon as you *hear* that call, *right?* "

"I… didn't want to assume anything," Hazuki shrugged, but she gave Kaname a knowing smile as she did.

Kaname laughed at this. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that?"

"Better than a pain in the neck, I suppose."

There was a long pause.

"I'm sorry," said Hazuki. "Too soon?"

To her own surprise, Kaname stood up and leaned over the bed. It was an awkward position for a hug, made doubly so by the wires and Hazuki's restricted range of motion, but they managed it anyway. "Just say the word," she whispered roughly. "I've got your back."

"Likewise," Hazuki whispered in reply, holding the other girl as tightly as she could.

Kaname found that this, too, felt pretty damned close to perfect, even if the reasons were different.

Feeling very much caught in the act, Tamao slipped her hand out from under Chikaru's shirt. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm not upset," Chikaru smiled warmly. "I'm just not sure what you were hoping to accomplish. Hazuki-chan will be out of the infirmary in the morning, my sweet, and I'm sure she'd be far more responsive to that sort of thing than I."

At the mention of Hazuki's name, though, Tamao felt her eyes fill with tears, as her earlier numbness cracked and shattered beneath the

weight of her conflicting emotions. Chikaru was quick to wrap both arms around her and hold her as the first sobs came. "I should have been there," she wept.

"It's okay, Tamao-chan. You can't be there every moment: no one can."

"You don't understand," she choked out. "I *should* have been there, and any other week I *would* have been, but I *wasn't!* Because… because I was back in my room feeling *sorry* for myself about Hazuki-chan enjoying it when she got a hug from her first love!"

"Oh, Tamao-chan," Chikaru sighed, pulling her closer. "It didn't happen. She'll be fine."

"But what if it *had* happened? I'd never be able to see her again, or touch her again, and… and I'd have to carry this with me forever, knowing that I could have helped if I'd just… *believed* in her a little more."

"Tamao-chan, listen to me," Chikaru said in her most reassuring tone. "Yes, you're a functionally immortal vessel holding a piece of the power of creation itself. You're *also* a sixteen-year-old girl in your first major relationship. You're entitled to feel insecure now and again. The important thing is that you *won't* have to carry that with you forever, because *Hazuki-chan is going to be okay* ."

Tamao nodded against her, but the self-recriminations were far from over. "And then I made it worse. I used you."

There was a pause, and then Chikaru actually started to giggle. "Oh, my sweet Tamao-chan, that's absurd. You've done nothing of the sort."

"But… but I touched you, when… I should have known better."

Chikaru gave a patient sigh, and pulled away slightly so that she could look Tamao in the eyes. "Honestly, do you think you're the only

emotionally distraught young woman who's gone for the grope in this bed?"

"But… I should know better," Tamao repeated.

"Tamao-chan, let me say this plainly. *I love you.* And as someone who loves you, I'm more than aware of what a tactile person you are. In that, we're a lot alike: for me, touching is trust, and comfort. Now… there are certain things I can't do, Tamao-chan, and we've been over that before. But… all the same, if this body can give you comfort, then you're more than welcome to it." Her smile then twisted into its normal mischievous self. "Within reason, of course. The point is that I trust you."

"Even if I was trying to do something to break that trust?" Tamao asked, darkly.

"I'm still not upset with you," Chikaru said softly. "Though… I'm curious to know what you were up to?"

Tamao sighed and closed her eyes. "I'm not sure I know that myself. I think I was just… hoping you might… like it?"

"Well… I can't say it was unpleasant," Chikaru considered. "It was stimulating in its own way, but that's an area with a high concentration of nerve endings, so…"

"I'm sorry," Tamao repeated. "I should have known better. It's just that… when I'm with Hazuki-chan, when we're…"

"Making love," Chikaru supplied.

Tamao blushed at the fact that she hadn't even been able to use that phrase with Chikaru, of all people. "Yes, when we're together… I feel like I can fly. I'm not sure how much of it is physical, how much is emotional, and how much is *Souma*, but… I don't care. It's… *glorious*, and… I just wish I could show it to you."

"And with the fear of losing Hazuki-chan, the need to show me suddenly became that much more intense?" Chikaru asked delicately.

Once again, Chikaru had managed to get right to the heart of things, and dig out the truth that Tamao had not wanted to admit to herself. "I'm sorry," she said again.

Chikaru peered intently at her for a moment, then slowly sat up on the mattress. Then, to Tamao's profound shock, she grabbed the hem of her bedshirt and pulled it over her head and off. She settled once more at Tamao's side, reached out and gently took the younger girl's head in her hands, then pulled her close, resting the side of Tamao's face against her breasts.

"What… what are you doing?" Tamao asked in a tiny voice.

"Trusting you," Chikaru laughed, and with the ear that was pressed against her, Tamao could hear that laugh resonating inside her, along with the slow, steady beat of her heart. "Trusting that you know the difference between comfort and pleasure better than you think you do."

Tamao's throat had gone dry. She almost licked her lips out of reflex, but quickly realized that given her present position, she'd probably hit something else instead, and she didn't want to do anything to make this moment end. Slowly, gradually, she felt herself relaxing as she listened to the sound of the other woman's heart. The surprising intimacy of their position was turning out to be very comforting after all.

Nonetheless… "Um… Chikaru?"

"Mmm?"

"Is it okay if… I'm finding this just a *teeny* bit pleasurable?"

"I'd be disappointed if you weren't," Chikaru giggled, and the way she moved against Tamao was, for a moment, almost unbearably wonderful. "You know my boundaries, my sweet, but… it doesn't make me any less yours."

Smiling softly, and feeling herself almost encased in warmth, Tamao nodded against her and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Chikaru."

"You're more than welcome, my darling. Now rest."

It wasn't much longer before the nurse came in and made it clear that her patient needed to rest now. Kaname said her goodbyes, noting as she did that Hazuki suddenly looked very sleepy indeed. Maybe those painkillers were kicking in harder now that the conversation had come to an end.

To her surprise, Momomi was there in the waiting room, doing just that. Upon seeing Kaname, she stood up, took a couple of steps closer, then stopped. Kaname crossed the remaining distance, and for a long while they just looked at one another.

"Are you okay?" Momomi asked.

There was no annoyance in her voice, and no sarcasm: just genuine concern. Kaname took her lover in her arms, and they held one another tightly. "I don't want to marry him, Momomi," she whispered.

"Then don't," Momomi whispered in reply.

They broke, and Kaname again looked into her eyes, this time with no small amount of surprise in her own.

"Come on," Momomi said with a faded attempt at a smile. "Come back to our room and let me take you to bed. We can figure the rest out later."

Kaname closed her eyes. "I love you, Momomi."

Momomi once again stepped into her arms and held her, but said nothing more.

Only when she was certain that Tamao was asleep did Chikaru let out the metaphorical breath she had been holding. Things were getting to a dangerous place, and she was not certain how much longer she could walk this tightrope.

As good as it felt to cuddle Tamao against her bare skin like this, Chikaru knew that Tamao had wanted more, and she wondered now if this might backfire: if she might be giving the dear girl false hope that she was getting closer to being able to *offer* more. She had meant what she had said earlier, about trusting Tamao to know the difference between comfort and pleasure, but now that she and Hazuki were deeply involved in the latter, how much longer would they need the former?

She was running out of concessions to make, and the next one might hurt her loved ones deeply as she reached the limit of how much she could truly pleasure them. It was looking more and more like the desire she so desperately wanted to feel might *never* show up, and where would she be then? At what point would she be forced to admit that she was, for all her best intentions, stringing them along?

At the same time, though, if she closed her eyes, she could still vividly remember the feeling of Tamao's fingertips tracing slow circles over her breast, and she could not deny that it had been… *stimulating*, as she had said. Was it all just sensitive skin and nerve endings, though, or was there something else there, hanging tantalizingly out of reach like the grapes to the fox?

She did her best to push those thoughts from her mind, and concentrated instead on the warmth of Tamao's breath against her skin. She would enjoy these moments for as long as they were willing to share them, and hope for the best.

Next: Voices

Voices

Some days are fairy tales, some days belie

Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie

Could open up their sweet throats to serenade a king

That's a lot of heat to take and still be able to sing

-Indigo Girls

Part 12: Voices

Kojima-sensei's office, if one could call it that, was a corner of the equipment room sectioned off with temporary walls that had somewhere along the line become permanent. All told, it was a somewhat dingy corner to the shining newness of St. Spica's athletic complex, but at least it would be a private space in which to talk.

Chikaru stood before the single door of the office and took a deep breath, then looked to either side to see the other three flanking her. "Last chance to back out," she said quietly. "Tamao-chan, you in particular don't have to be here for this."

"We're in this together," Tamao replied, though she looked more than a little nervous.

"Have you thought about how much we should tell her?" Hazuki asked.

"Obsessively," Chikaru sighed. "I think we'll still have to play it by ear, though."

Kaname snorted. "What could possibly go wrong? 'Hi, sensei. Why, yes, the four of us have glowing green superpowers, what of it?'"

Before Chikaru or anyone else could reply to this, the door opened from the inside, revealing the sensei in question. "I thought I heard voices," she nodded, looking the group over. "Come on in and find a seat where you can."

Finding a seat turned out to be the first challenge, as the inside of Kojima-sensei's office was even less spacious than the outside walls made it appear. While the sensei herself circled around to the back of her desk, Kaname made herself as comfortable as possible atop a low filing cabinet while Hazuki propped herself up in the corner, leaving the room's two actual chairs to Chikaru and Tamao. There was a small tea tray set up on one of the few unoccupied sections of the desk, and Kojima-sensei poured five cupfuls from an electric kettle before passing them out to her guests.

Apart from murmured thanks for the tea, not a word was spoken for some time, as Chikaru wrestled with a way to open the discussion. As it turned out, though, she didn't need to, because what Kojima-sensei said next completely floored her. "So… are you *onmy ōj i?* "

Chikaru had spent hours rehearsing possible explanations in her head, but never would she have expected that Kojima-sensei would blow her out of the water by opening the conversation with something so blunt as this. For a moment, she could only look to her three fellow *Souma* -bearers, seeing her own surprise mirrored in each of their faces to one degree or another.

"I figure it has to be something like that, right?" Kojima-sensei went on, when none of the girls said a word in reply. "You don't expect me to believe that Azuma-kun only had the wind knocked out of her, do you? I saw the way her head was laying against her shoulder. So what are you? Are you *onmy ōj i*, or what?"

"That's…" Chikaru started, but she just as quickly stopped. Couching it in this way had honestly not occurred to her. "That's actually not far

off at all, sensei," she said quietly.

"Interesting," Kojima-sensei nodded, the traces of a smile appearing as she steepled her fingers over her chin. "So… what, do you go to school during the week, and then on weekends you're off hanging around with Abe no Seimei, saving empires from Tamamo no Mae?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure I met her once," Hazuki said in entirely too casual a voice.

"Which one?" Kaname asked, just as conversationally.

"Tamamo no Mae. I'm not sure it was really *her*, but she was a nine-tailed kitsune, at any rate. And Abe no Seimei was a man: didn't you see the movie they did?"

"Oh yeah, that's right."

Sensing that the conversation was in danger of going catastrophically wrong in a hurry, Chikaru spoke again before Kojima-sensei could get a word in. "Except that the *onmy ōj i* were more well-known for their divination, and what we practice has more to do with movements of energy." She shot a look at Hazuki, who gave a lazy shrug in reply, as if to say: "Hey, in for a penny…"

"Movements of energy, eh?" Kojima-sensei mused. "Enough energy to, say, fix a broken neck?"

"In… in this case, yes," Chikaru nodded. "Though to be honest, I'd never done anything quite like that before."

" *Kaji*, then," Kojima-sensei said in a softer voice, as though piecing it together in her head. "Healing energy. Verrrry interesting, Minamoto-san. So you're more like *shugenja*, then, or even shamans?"

"Sensei," Tamao said cautiously, "um… you don't seem very… *surprised* by any of this."

"Ehh, mysticism is kind of a hobby of mine, Suzumi-san," the kendō instructor shrugged. "I'm only as Catholic as I have to be to keep my job here; I'm actually a practicing Buddhist."

There was a pause, while four pairs of eyes stared at Kojima-sensei in varying degrees of disbelief. The teacher scowled at them. "Yeah, shut up. I'm a long way from enlightenment. So tell me this, my little practitioners of the old arts, if you have healing energy, why the hell are you going to school and not going out and tending to the sick?"

"Because… we can't," Chikaru explained, still in disbelief that the conversation was turning out this way. "You see… the four of us have energy which we can manipulate to one degree or another… but only within ourselves and one another. I seem to have a knack for healing, while Hazuki-chan and Kaname-san channel it toward physical skill, and Tamao-chan…" she trailed off, not sure if she wanted to talk about the structure of the universe just yet.

"We're still figuring mine out," Tamao said, filling in the gap for her with a statement that managed to be true and yet properly evasive.

"So you quit my kendō team because you have a mystical energy source?" Kojima-sensei sighed, glaring at Hazuki. "Do you have *any* idea how handy that would be at Regionals?"

"With respect, sensei, I didn't quit," Hazuki smiled back, giving a slight bow. "But yes, that's more or less the reason."

"Too much of a conscience for her own good, this one," Kojima-sensei huffed, but then her expression turned more serious. "So… I'm guessing you couldn't… teach *someone else* to do what you do, then?"

The unspoken question hung in the air between them for a few moments, and then Chikaru shook her head. "I'm sorry, sensei, but we can't. We can't pass the energy on to anyone else. It was given to us by… a higher source."

"Ah," the sensei nodded, a flicker of very real disappointment crossing her features before she peered more closely at Chikaru. "So this is the part where your sister comes into the story, then?"

Chikaru very nearly choked on her tea, earning her a concerned pat on the back from Tamao. "Sensei?" she sputtered.

"Oh, come on, a little credit here?" the older woman scowled. "I know, I know. You're teenagers, and as much as you're taught to respect and revere your sensei, you probably think everyone over the age of thirty is an idiot. Maybe the parochial set was willing to close their eyes and ears to everything around them, but some of us actually pay attention. I always knew there was something *far* too interesting about your sister, Minamoto-san, and I happen to know that along with *you* being her sister, *you* were a family friend," she directed this at Hazuki, " *you* kissed her and freaked out," a hand to Kaname, and finally she gestured vaguely to Tamao. "And *you*… okay, I don't know where you fit in, but you probably had some connection with her that no one knew about. Am I right? Was she the source of this energy of yours?"

"She… um, yes, she was," Chikaru nodded quickly, her mind whirling with questions. How much did this woman already know? And were there others who suspected the same?

Kojima-sensei leaned back in her chair, and by the expression on her face, she was choosing her next words carefully. "So… what was she? A *Bodhisattva* ?"

There was yet another dramatic pause after Kojima-sensei asked her question. Then, very softly, Hazuki began to laugh. "I don't know if I'd go that far, sensei. More than what we are, certainly, but… I know her far too well to think of her as a perfectly enlightened being."

"I don't know, she seemed pretty realized to me," Kaname added.

"You just had the hots for her," Hazuki waved.

"Oh, hello, pot. This is kettle calling."

Chikaru was beginning to wonder what the two of them had spoken of at Hazuki's hospital bedside, because whatever it was had left them far more comfortable with one another than even she could have hoped. Nonetheless, they were taking the conversation away again, so she stepped in. "I preferred to think of her as an angel, but… whatever you want to call her, she was not of this mortal world of ours, that much is certain."

Kojima-sensei nodded slowly, the soft smile appearing rather alien on her normally stormy face. She then took a deep breath and sat back in her chair. "Very well, children. Thank you for your story."

"Sensei, do you… do you believe us?" Tamao asked, wonderingly.

"It's a perfectly reasonable story, so long as you're willing to believe the impossible," the kendō instructor shrugged. "If I hadn't seen Minamoto-san here more or less bring Azuma-kun back to life right in front of me, maybe I'd be a little skeptical, but…" She trailed off, then gave another shrug.

Chikaru took a long breath, then asked the question she'd been dreading. "Sensei… can we trust you to keep this to yourself? It's very important that…"

She was interrupted by a bark of laughter. "Who in the world would I *tell*, Minamoto-san? More to the point, who'd believe me? Don't worry, children, your secret's safe with me."

Tamao gave an audible sigh of relief, but Kojima-sensei was not finished speaking yet. "However, in return for keeping your secret…" She pointed to Hazuki first. "Azuma-kun, you need to do an even better job teaching your club about safety, and you need to impress upon them that they're *years* from being able to do what you do. Unless you make a better, more consistent point of telling them not to emulate what you do in your own spars, we might find ourselves with more injuries. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sensei," Hazuki nodded. "I'll do my best."

The sensei then narrowed her eyes at Chikaru and Tamao. "I don't have anything for either of you," she said, shaking her head at them before turning steely eyes to Kaname. "You, however? Knowing what I now know, I'm going to loudly reiterate that you need a s***load of discipline to go with that skill of yours. If you're not going to get it from me, you'd damn well better get it somewhere, but I strongly advise you to use that door again in the future. Do you understand?"

In spite of her earlier jocularity, Kaname's face was nothing but serious as she stood and bowed to her former instructor. "I understand, sensei."

"Okay, get out of here, then," Kojima-sensei said in a sort of growling sigh. "I'm going to be spending most of the afternoon answering questions about why one of my students ended up in the infirmary, and I could use a little peace of mind of my own. Go on, shoo."

After placing the teacups back on the tray and thanking the sensei for her hospitality, the four students left the cramped office, Hazuki closing the door behind them.

"So…" Tamao said at length.

"That… went better than I expected," Chikaru admitted.

Hazuki chuckled. "I keep trying to tell you all that Kojima-sensei is actually pretty awesome."

"I think you're still feeling those pain medications more than you think," Kaname grumbled. "Is there anything else you want me to do, or have I served enough penance yet?"

"No one's asking you to do penance, Kaname," Hazuki smirked at her former rival, before her grin became positively evil in nature. "However, if you still feel the need for that, and if you really want to

make it clear to everyone else that there are no hard feelings between us, maybe you could join the rest of us on Saturday afternoon?"

"Why? What's happening Saturday afternoon?"

The St. Lulim Girls' School Musical Self-Expression Club Welcomes You to our Semi-Annual Karaoke Spectacular!

While St. Spica had the most well-known choir on the hill, it was no secret that the best overall music program belonged to St. Lulim, which had everything from a few smaller vocal ensembles to a fifty-seat chamber orchestra. The campus was thus littered with practice rooms and recital halls, some larger than others.

Even though the event was being held in one of the larger halls, and even though it was largely dormitory residents due to the timing, the crowd was nothing short of immense. Lulim had once again gone all-out to entertain its fellow academies, though, with the hall filled with beautifully decorated tables, Lulim students in maid cosplay serving drinks, and Council President Minamoto herself taking care of the music, piping it through from a laptop on stage to an impressive set of speakers mounted overhead.

It was at one of these tables that Hazuki and Tamao found themselves crowded in with Nagisa, Kaname and Momomi, taking turns looking over the list of available music. Hazuki was impressed by the selection, which went a lot further than the standard pop, rock and ballads. Along with an extensive list of anime songs (supplied by Kizuna and Remon, no doubt), there was quite a bit of material from the United States and particularly Europe as well.

"So… what are you going to sing?" Hazuki asked Kaname, reprising her evil grin from the other day.

Kaname gave her the eyebrow. "Wait a minute. You never said anything about singing."

"What else do you do at karaoke?"

"Listen impatiently and try to enjoy some watery lemonade?"

"Hey, I'll sing too. We can even do a duet, like Tamao-chan and Nagisa-chan are going to do." Hazuki indicated the two Miatorans, who were poring over the "duets" section of the list and whispering excitedly to one another.

"No duets," Kaname said, shaking her head forcefully. "I'm only a month or two removed from hating you, remember? It's *way* too early for that."

"You should sing something, Kaname," Momomi added, leaning in to give Hazuki a conspiratorial grin. "She's actually pretty good, you know."

Amused at the turn of circumstances that had led to herself and Momomi (of all people) being in the position to gang up on Kaname, Hazuki was about to press the issue further, but then the music cut out and the stage lights went down. All eyes turned to the now-darkened stage, where only Chikaru was visible off to one side, her smiling face lit by the display of her laptop.

Then, with a very distinctive guitar riff, the lights came back up, revealing Kizuna and Remon, still in maid cosplay, standing at the microphones with their backs to the audience, clapping their hands in time with the accompaniment. Within seconds, the two Lulim third-years launched into a perfectly choreographed rendition of the European dance-rock song *Cobrastyle* by the Teddybears, taking turns with the lyrics and obviously having the time of their lives with it.

Hazuki wasn't quite sure about the duo's English, but then again, if she remembered correctly, this song was only marginally in English anyhow. And anyway, it was worth it to hear Kizuna and Remon singing *Me style is de bomb diggy bomb de dang de dang diggy diggy* at the top of their lungs.

The song ended with a rousing cheer from the audience, as Kizuna and Remon bowed and waved to everyone. "Good evening!" Kizuna called out. "Welcome to the semi-annual karaoke spectacular!"

A grinning Remon picked up the narration. "We're looking forward to hearing *everyone* sing today, so bring your selections to President Minamoto-sama, and… let's all have fun!"

Several girls immediately got up and made for the side of the stage, where the two juniors guided them to form a line. Hazuki turned back to Kaname. "You're not going to make me go up there by myself, are you?"

With a scowl, Kaname relented. "Fine, I'll sing. But no duets."

"That's the spirit," Hazuki grinned, pulling the other girl to her feet. "Well, ladies?" she asked the table at large. "Shall we?"

There were several other performances before the five of them reached the front of the line: mostly idol songs, with the occasional ballad. One older Miator girl even tried to do something by Gackt, which was a bit of a stunner. When it came to be their turn, Momomi went first, singing a harmless little love song in a surprisingly sweet and tuneful voice that left the crowd sighing and smiling.

Kaname was next, bringing her selection to Chikaru. As Hazuki watched the exchange, she saw Chikaru's eyes go wide, after which she nodded in appreciation. Kaname stepped up to the one of the microphones, took it from its stand, and waited, her eyes not leaving the stage. Hazuki was more than a little surprised by her posture: was the indomitable Kenjō Kaname actually *shy* ?

Then the music started: something ethereal and melancholy, mostly in synthesizer, but soon accompanied by a mournful guitar. After a few introductory measures, Kaname looked up at the crowd, and even Hazuki's breath hitched at the intensity in her face as she started to sing. In French.

Faudrait pouvoir jeter tous les mannequins d'osier

Du haut d'un grand pont

Ces fantômes oubliés, ces ombres du passé

Qui nous espionnent

Her voice was low-pitched, throaty, and positively overflowing with an aching bitterness, and the entire audience was watching with rapt amazement. Hazuki found herself suddenly believing all the stories she'd heard about how Kaname had long been regarded as one of the school's idols. She was not shy at all: she was working the crowd, and doing so with incredible charisma. She really was *that* good.

Faudrait pouvoir brûler les visages adorés

De notre enfance

Marcher d'un pas léger vers le soleil qui vient

En insouciance

The song swelled, the intensity grew, and Kaname sang the next in a higher voice that was almost a scream, and yet held the tune flawlessly.

Et les regarder passer

Sur la rivière gelée…

A few more verses and choruses later, and the accompaniment faded out, leaving Kaname standing on stage looking as though she'd just run a marathon. The crowd ate it up, showering her with cheers, squeals and applause, and just like that, she was back in school idol mode, bowing to her fans with a smile that was more like a smirk. She then turned that smirk toward Hazuki and raised her eyebrows, as if to say: "And?"

Hazuki gave her a bewildered look, as if to say: "Wait, I have to follow *that* ?"

Kaname's smirk deepened, as if to say: "Remember, you're the one who asked for it."

Suddenly feeling a lot less confident, Hazuki approached Chikaru with her own selection. Her dear one said nothing, but gave her an encouraging wink as she queued up the song. Hazuki stepped out under the lights and approached the microphone stand.

As she waited for the song to begin, she looked over to Tamao and Nagisa, who were now at the front of the line. Tamao smiled brilliantly at her, then raised two fingers and clicked them together as though they were a pair of scissors. For a moment, Hazuki was confused at the gesture, and then she blushed profusely.

Well. *That* hadn't exactly helped.

Then the music kicked in, and there was a buzz of response from certain members of the audience (not to mention a double squee that could only have been Remon and Kizuna) as the hall was filled with gentle orchestral sounds from generations before and a continent away. Hazuki smiled to herself, swaying gently with the beat. She knew her own English was nothing pretty, but she'd seen *Evangelion* enough times that she could sing this particular old standard in her sleep.

Fly me to the moon, and let me play among the stars

Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars

In other words… hold my hand

In other words… darling, kiss me

Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forevermore

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore

In other words… please be true

In other words… I love you

A lengthy instrumental section was to follow, so Hazuki looked over at Tamao again to sing the last line, and this time beckoned her up onto the stage. Tamao looked confused for a moment, but then Nagisa all but pushed her forward, and she stepped up onto the raised platform and approached the taller girl. Hazuki stepped closer, took her hands, guided her into a dance position, and then proceeded to lead her in what turned out to be an impressively passable foxtrot, given its completely spur-of-the-moment nature. Tamao's face was now nothing short of beaming as they stepped and spun back and forth across the stage, only parting when it was time for Hazuki to sing the second verse. Tamao hurried off the stage to rejoin Nagisa, still smiling to split her face in half, and Hazuki returned to the microphone.

After singing the second verse (same as the first), Hazuki turned her eyes and her beckoning finger to Chikaru, who came out from behind her computer to join Hazuki for another brief dance break, much to the continued delight of the audience. This one managed to be a little more solid, probably because Chikaru had a better idea of what was coming, and it was over all too soon, leaving Hazuki to sing the finale on her own.

Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forevermore

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore

In other words… please be true

In other words… I love you

In other words… I love you

She bowed to the cheering crowd, then stepped down from the stage and rejoined Kaname and Momomi at their table. Kaname said

nothing, but raised one fist, which Hazuki gently tapped with her own before settling in to watch the rest of the show.

"That's settled then," said Momomi decisively, nodding across the council table to the two Étoile before casting a glance to either side, briefly meeting the eyes of her fellow class presidents. "Now, if there's no further business..?" She desperately hoped that no one would speak up: her head was simply killing her.

To Momomi's great annoyance, however, Chikaru raised her hand. "Yes, President Kiyashiki-san," her Lulim counterpart smiled. "I was wondering when we might discuss the upcoming Cultural Festival. Specifically, Astraea Hall's annual stage play?"

Momomi desperately wanted to table this and go back to her room, but it would be the Étoile's decision as to whether or not this merited immediate discussion. *Please don't be interested, please don't be interested, please don't be…*

"Well, it's a bit early maybe," Amane began, briefly filling Momomi with hope only to immediately dash it on the rocks, "but since this year the production is in St. Lulim's hands, I'm curious to hear what you have in mind?"

"Thank you, Étoile-sama," Chikaru nodded. Momomi suppressed a groan as the Lulim president reached into her bookbag and took out a small stack of scripts, which she passed out to all assembled. After Momomi was handed her copy, she squinted to focus on the title page.

" *The Pirates of Penzance* ?" Hikari said aloud, even as Momomi read the words.

"Gilbert and Sullivan," Chikaru nodded. "Late Nineteenth-Century English light opera at its best. A swashbuckling love story with some of the most memorable characters ever to set foot on a stage."

"English?" Amane repeated, looking a bit skeptical.

"As in, from England itself," Chikaru elaborated. "We would, of course, be performing a translation."

"Interesting," said Miator president Misao Katsuragi (the one many underclassmen referred to as "The Major," though Momomi didn't understand the reference) as she paged through the script. "So… a spoken-word adaptation of the light opera, then?"

"As a matter of fact, no," Chikaru smiled across the table. "My proposal is that we perform the *actual* light opera, music and all."

It was suddenly quiet enough in the council room to hear the proverbial pin drop. "I'm sorry, did I hear that correctly?" Momomi asked at last.

"You did indeed, President Kiyashiki-san. With St. Spica's depth of quality vocalists, along with St. Miator's very talented student body, there would be no trouble at all filling out a cast of principals and chorus."

"Wait a moment, President Minamoto-san," Misao interrupted, shaking her head slowly. "While I can appreciate your ambition for the project, if you're going to do something like this you need to do it properly. Can we realistically field a cast, a chorus, *and* an orchestra between Miator and Spica?"

"Perhaps not," Chikaru admitted. "However, since St. Lulim is in charge of putting on the production itself, I think it would be only fair that we provided the orchestra as well. To that end, I've spoken with Ōhara-sensei, the instructor of the St. Lulim Chamber Orchestra. She was quite excited at the idea, and in fact told me that she may very well choose to teach the score to her students for their Winter concert, even if we decide against performing it for the Cultural Festival."

"An opera," Amane said slowly, looking a bit gray as she no doubt made the realization that she, as Étoile, would be expected to participate.

"Comic opera," Chikaru corrected her. "Lighter, funnier, and no one has to die."

"I think it sounds wonderful," Hikari beamed, practically bubbling over with excitement. "And I daresay the costuming will be simply *amazing* with you in charge of the production, Minamoto-san."

"Let's just say I have a good head start on pirate costumes," Chikaru giggled. "So… what do you think?"

"If you think we can pull it off, I'm game for a challenge," Misao nodded. "When would you audition your vocalists?"

Chikaru's smile grew wider than ever. "As it happens, President Katsuragi-san, I already have."

Several days later, after being given a proper introduction by the Étoile, Chikaru stood before the assembled residents at the evening meal, a single sheet of paper in her hands. "Thank you, Étoile-sama, and greetings to all. As many of you are probably aware, for this year's entry into the annual Cultural Festival, the upper classes of Astraea Hall will be performing the comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*, by English humorist W.S. Gilbert and composer Sir Arthur Sullivan. It is now my pleasure to announce the actors and singers who will be filling the principal roles.

"As Major-General Stanley, the comic lead and singer of one of the most famous patter-songs in the history of light opera… from St. Miator, Mizushima Noriko-san.

"As Frederick, the pirate apprentice who leaves his merry band at the age of twenty-one, only to find himself bound to them by duty… from St. Spica, Nanto Yaya-san.

"As Mabel, the daughter of Major-General Stanley with whom Frederick falls hopelessly in love… the Étoile, Konohana Hikari-sama.

"As the Pirate King, the leader of the pirates to whom Frederick was apprenticed… from St. Spica, Kenjō Kaname-san.

"As Samuel, the trusted lieutenant of the Pirate King… from St. Spica, Kiyashiki Momomi-san.

"As Ruth, the 'piratical maid of all work' and former nanny to Frederick… from St. Miator, Takemura Chihaya-san.

"As Edith and Kate, Mabel's sisters and fellow wards of the Major-General… from St. Miator, Aoi Nagisa-san and Suzumi Tamao-san.

"Lastly, as the Sergeant of the Police, who is called upon to meet the pirates in battle… the Étoile, Ohtori Amane-sama.

"For those interested in joining the chorus of pirates, wards and policemen, additional auditions will be announced in the forthcoming days. Meanwhile, please join me in a round of applause for the lead actors who will represent us at this year's Cultural Festival."

"So do you *really* think a karaoke party was the best way to audition vocalists?"

Chikaru turned her head to one side to grin at Hazuki. "I think it was an excellent way, thank you. The way I figure it, if you can't get up in front of your friends and dorm-mates to sing a song of your own choosing, how in the world are you going to stand in front of an even bigger crowd of friends and schoolmates and sing a song that wasn't yours?"

The evening found the two of them in the comfortable old position of lying side by side on Chikaru's bed. Tamao was not there, as she was currently back in her room reading through the show's libretto

with Nagisa, leaving the remaining two to chat lazily about these recent developments. "Was the casting a surprise all around, or did you warn any of them?" Hazuki asked.

"Mostly surprises, but I needed to confirm with a few of them. The part of Ruth, for example, is supposed to be an aged, rather plain lady who gets to be the butt of a great many jokes, so I wanted to warn Chihaya-chan before casting her. Luckily, she seems to have a good sense of humor, and agreed to it."

"Hmm, is Chihaya-san the one who did Gackt?"

"No, Chihaya-chan did that rather saucy Vocaloid song. The Gackt number was by Miator's class president. Don't tell me you didn't notice?"

Hazuki frowned. "I was mostly looking through the song list at that point."

"But speaking of Katsuragi-san, I was approached by Kiyashiki-san immediately after dinner tonight and informed that she may drop out, so I may wind up swapping one class president for another. And as for our senior Étoile, let's just say that she was on the reluctant side, but the Sergeant of the Police only appears in Act II, and is very much a comic role, so perhaps Amane-sama will have the chance to unlock her inner comedienne."

"I must say, I'd pay good money to see that," Hazuki chuckled. "On the subject of Étoile, though… I know I wasn't here for last year, but I've heard the stories. Do you really think casting Hikari-sama and Yaya-san as the young lovers was the right thing to do?"

"I understand your concern, but theirs are the best voices for the parts," Chikaru told her. "Also, I asked each of them whether or not they'd be uncomfortable with the arrangement before I made the announcement, and they each denied that there would be any problems. They've come a long way since last year, and I think they'll be fine performing together."

"If you're sure, then."

"Well, I'm not *entirely* certain, but what's life without a little adventure, right?" Chikaru's face then lit up, as if remembering something pleasant. "And going back to the subject of unlocking hidden talents, Hazuki-chan, when and where did you learn to foxtrot?"

Hazuki chuckled at the memory. "I've seen *Shall We Dance* about a hundred times. It was one of my favorite movies to watch with Hatsumi, and we spent months teaching ourselves ballroom dancing."

"A handy talent to have, on stage or off."

Hazuki nodded slowly, then paused for a moment, wondering how exactly to go about asking the next question. She decided to do it as a statement instead. "So… I'm guessing I didn't have the *vocal* chops, then."

To Hazuki's surprise, Chikaru pushed herself up to her knees, swung one leg over Hazuki's supine form, and settled down on top of her, more or less straddling her hips. Hazuki was suddenly very conscious of the fact that Chikaru was still partly dressed in her uniform, or at least the button-down shirt and (more to the point) the ridiculously short skirt that went with it, making this sudden proximity a bit more intimate than Hazuki was used to with the older girl, their habits for cuddling notwithstanding.

"Let me tell you about your voice, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru said, her own voice taking on a somewhat intent tone in spite of her smile. "Your voice is nothing short of gorgeous. It's melodic and breathy and sexy. It's a voice for torch songs, lullabies, and whispered confessions of love, and if for some reason I must leave this life before you, I hope the last thing I hear is your voice singing me to sleep. It's a *wonderful* voice."

"However..?"

"However, I'm afraid it's *not* a good voice for opera, comic or otherwise. There's a speaking-only part for another of Mabel's sisters, and I considered giving that one to you, but I think I would have had a hard time explaining why I gave parts to both of my girlfriends, no matter how good either of you are. These shows are always going to have a political side to them, no matter how much we might hope that talent alone wins the day." She closed her eyes and gave a small, apologetic smile. "I'm sure you'd be accepted for a chorus part, though, if you want to be involved. Would that be something you might..?" She opened her eyes again and looked down at Hazuki. "What are you smiling about?"

"I'm sorry, did the conversation continue?" Hazuki asked, grinning more widely. "I'm afraid I was still back at the part where you referred to me as your girlfriend."

Chikaru, to Hazuki's astonishment, actually blushed at this. "I suppose I did."

"You know, I think that may be the first time you've used that word in that way."

"It's a sweet word," Chikaru nodded. "I like it. Even if I'm not a very good one so far."

"Not a…? Chikaru, you're one of the wisest people I've ever met, but that's just silly. Why would you even say that?"

Chikaru frowned. "We do lack a certain level of intimacy that one might expect from girlfriends."

"I don't know, this is pretty intimate right here," Hazuki said, indicating their current position. "The only other people I've ever had sit on me like this are Tamao, our *other* girlfriend, and Chou'un, who was trying *very* hard to seduce me at the time."

"Ah, yes, Chou'un," Chikaru grinned. "Your master in naginata and the Zen of lesbianism. I hope I get to meet her someday; it would be

fun to compare notes about you."

"Oh, really?"

"Well, Tamao-chan and I *already* compare notes about you, you know."

"Hey, Tamao-chan and I talk too," Hazuki said with a mock-scowl. "For example, Not-A-Very-Good-Girlfriend-sama, I understand that Tamao-chan had some face time with Lulim's finest while I was laid up in the infirmary."

Chikaru looked away, part of the blush returning. "Ah, she told you about that, did she?"

"Of course she did. Chikaru, any time your breasts make an appearance, it's a cause for celebration." Hazuki closed her eyes and smiled. "The fact that you're as fearless as you are about changing clothes in our presence is something that makes both of your girlfriends *very* happy, thank you very much."

There was no immediate reply, but after a few moments came the sound of Chikaru lightly clearing her throat. Hazuki opened her eyes and looked up at the other girl.

Chikaru had chosen a front-clasping bra today. Hazuki could tell because it was now very much *un* clasped, and Chikaru had also unbuttoned her uniform shirt, holding both articles of clothing out to either side and giving Hazuki quite the eyeful in the process.

"What's this, then?" Hazuki asked softly.

"Just evening the score," Chikaru shrugged, giving Hazuki an odd little smile. "I hope you don't mind?"

Hazuki gave a tiny laugh. "Well no, of course I don't *mind*, but are you sure you want to do that? This is me, after all: once I see I'll want to touch, and once I touch I'll want to fondle, and once I fondle I'll

want to kiss, and once I kiss I'll probably want to lick, and…" She immediately stopped as Chikaru's face fell and the older girl once again closed her shirt over herself. "And that was *exactly* the wrong thing to say, wasn't it? I'm sorry."

"No, *I'm* the one who's sorry, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru sighed. "You know, part of me wants to let you do whatever you want to this body, but… it would still just be the body, I'm afraid. It's not fair of me to tease you like this if I can't go any further."

"Stop that," Hazuki whispered, holding out her hands to take Chikaru's own.

"But you… *want* this body, don't you?" Chikaru asked.

"You're saying that like it's something completely separate," Hazuki replied. She released one of Chikaru's hands, then reached up and very carefully placed her palm over the middle of the other girl's chest, just barely touching the skin visible between the unbuttoned plackets of her uniform shirt. "And anyway, *this* is what I want most."

"Well, *that* belongs to the both of you," Chikaru said, a wan smile returning to her face.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier," Hazuki sighed. "I hope we haven't been making you uncomfortable with all the… looking."

"The looking doesn't bother me," Chikaru said, managing a small giggle. "I… actually like it when you look at me; otherwise, I wouldn't have just done that. It's nice to know that I can at least give you *that* level of pleasure." The smile faded again. "I'm terrified of leading you on, though. There are still things I'd like to try with the both of you, Hazuki-chan… levels of trust to work through… but I have to be the one to put the brakes on, and I don't want to hurt you when I do."

Hazuki was suddenly reminded of something Chikaru had said to her months ago, on a night when a particularly intense meditation session had changed everything between them. "You *can't* hurt me,

Chikaru," she whispered. "It's not leading me on if I know the limits are there, and I promise I can stop when you need me to. We're your lesbian training wheels, remember?"

"I remember," Chikaru laughed, her hair veiling her face for a moment as she looked down. "Well, then… I have to draw the line before the kissing and licking, but… I wouldn't mind trying the touching part."

"Are you sure?" Hazuki asked.

She nodded, and her mouth curled into one of her more mischievous smiles. "Possibly even the fondling part. Then maybe you'll be able to satisfy my curiosity about something."

Hazuki felt her mouth go dry as Chikaru once again pulled her shirt and bra to either side, and this time slid them off her shoulders to let them fall to the mattress. She then once again took both of Hazuki's hands in her own, and after only a moment's hesitation, placed them palm-first over her breasts. Hazuki was immediately struck by how soft Chikaru's skin was, and how warm, and how the *Souma* moved between them with this contact even as it had with every held hand and shared cuddle.

It was a nothing short of a perfect moment, and to her own partial surprise, Hazuki realized that her reassurances had not been bravado at all: she really *didn't* need anything more than this. She was sharing another moment of unexpected but very real intimacy with one of the women she loved, and it was wonderful.

"You *can* move your hands, you know," Chikaru winked, echoing back Hazuki's words from a similar encounter some weeks ago, when their roles had been reversed.

"Don't rush me," Hazuki laughed softly. "I want to enjoy every second of this."

"Ah, so now *I'm* the one who's going too fast, eh? My, how quickly things change."

"You know, we're positively *begging* for Kizuna and Remon to barge in."

"I locked the door."

"I thought you *never* locked your door."

"The doctor needs privacy sometimes too, you know," Chikaru giggled.

Hazuki did move her hands, then, but not very much at all: just enough to gently, almost reverently stroke the other girl's skin. "You feel incredible," she whispered.

"Thank you," Chikaru smiled. "But now maybe you can satisfy my curiosity?"

"Anything," Hazuki agreed.

"Tell me, then. Why exactly *does* this feel so incredible to you? I've seen you naked, Hazuki-chan: even if we don't count your recent interludes with Tamao-chan, you can't *possibly* tell me that you've never felt a pair of breasts before." She reached down and tapped Hazuki on the sternum for emphasis.

"Well… of course I have. I mean, I do *bathe*, after all."

"Precisely. So why the fascination?" Chikaru asked, her smile deepening. "Not every young lesbian that I've spoken to in this room is fixated on breasts, you know: usually it's the younger ones, and the ones who are… shall we say… not as developed as others. I have my own theories about the reasons why, but I couldn't ask any of them the way I can ask you. So tell me, Hazuki-chan, why are you and Tamao-chan both so interested in *mine* ?"

Hazuki gave Chikaru a look bordering on bewilderment. "You just answered the question. It's because they're *yours*, and we love you, and…" She broke off, once again thinking of that similar shared encounter from a few weeks earlier. "You said it yourself. Touching is trust, and knowing that you trust us is…"

"So… it's not sexual, then?" Chikaru asked, arching her eyebrow.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, *of course* part of it's sexual," Hazuki said, caught between a laugh and a dramatic sigh. "Fine. As long as we're comparing notes about our absent thirds, I can tell you for a fact that Tamao is *very* sensitive, and I'm not that far behind. And since I never got the education that Chou'un wanted to give me, we're still completely making things up as we go along. I think that Tamao and I have a tendency to do things that we know feel good to *us*, hoping that it will feel good to the other as well, and right now that goes for you, too. And my *God*, I can't believe we're having a discussion like this when I'm lying here with your breasts in my hands."

Chikaru laughed more naturally then, and smiled down at Hazuki. "I'm flattered that you're still trying to make me feel good."

"Yeah, well, I may be a terrible lesbian, but you can't fault me for trying."

"I don't think you're a terrible lesbian at all, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru said, shaking her head. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

"What makes you say that?"

"For starters," Chikaru went on, "are you aware that you almost never refer to yourself using *boku* anymore?"

Hazuki stopped in her mental tracks. "I don't?"

"Very infrequently, particularly compared to when I first met you. It still slips out sometimes, but for the most part it's *watashi* this and

watashi that. You haven't gone all the way to *atashi*, but… I think that's probably for the best."

"I… honestly hadn't noticed," Hazuki whispered.

"Mmm hmm. And do you want to know why I think that's happened?"

"Yes," Hazuki nodded slowly, wondering what Chikaru might be driving at.

"It's because you, my darling, are finally becoming comfortable in your own skin, and with your own identity. You don't have to justify your feelings any longer by referring to yourself as a boy when you speak. You're finally reaching a place of peace with what you are: a woman who loves other women."

Hazuki said nothing for a long time, letting those words simply wash over her. Her heart suddenly feeling very full, she sat up beneath Chikaru, slipped her hands across the other girl's bare back, and held her tightly. She then brought her lips to Chikaru's face and gave her a slow, languid kiss on the cheek, so that the corners of their mouths were less than a centimeter from touching. "I love you," she whispered in Chikaru's ear, her voice breathy with amazement at her good fortune.

"And I love you," Chikaru whispered in return. She then giggled again. "In other words…"

Next: Devotion

AUTHOR'S NOTE: So… yeah. Suzume here. I'm back. Sorry about the delay, but at least I was trying to be productive in a different fashion during this layoff: Ninemil and I have been putting together a presence for our stories and artwork on Facebook. (Well, the artwork part is all Nine, since I can't draw.) We've been long discussing a place to go and post meta, footnotes, soundtracks and other stuff

about our projects, so if that sort of "behind the scenes" stuff interests you at all, please come visit us at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook. (This chapter, for example, needs a crapload of footnotes for all the mysticism and song choices, sheesh.) Though if the spirit moves you to leave a review, please do me the favor of continuing to post them here: I do so love getting those emails!

Devotion

Now one day moves into two, I'm losing

Everything except for you

I would sing you a song of devotion

That's what I should do

.

-Indigo Girls

Part 13: Devotion

Miyuki paused at the partially open door to Kaori's guest room and poised her hand to knock, but the sound of rapid keystrokes brought her short.

So she was still at it, eh?

For the past few days, Kaori had been regularly spending several hours at a time busily typing away at the laptop Miyuki had given her. It was too constant to be anything like e-mail, and too frequent to be studying or reading. The most likely conclusion was that she was writing something, but what?

While Miyuki had no overt desire to pry, she had to weigh this against her responsibility to her guest. When she had volunteered to bring Kaori into their home, it had been less than an hour after the girl had been seriously contemplating suicide as the best way to save the destiny of the entire world… and making *sense* while doing so, given the adjusted rules of the game to which Miyuki was now becoming more aware. Because of this, she was understandably

reluctant to leave the younger girl alone for long stretches of time, lest such thoughts be allowed to return.

On the other hand, it couldn't be easy for Kaori to be constantly in the company of a relative stranger with the face and voice of her lost love. In that respect, Miyuki wondered if her decision to take Kaori in had been the best option after all. Somewhat ruefully, she realized that her actions had been primarily to protect Shizuma: even now, Shizuma's welfare was still very much making itself a priority in Miyuki's life.

Shaking her head at the irony of it all, Miyuki went ahead and knocked. "Kaori-chan?" she called.

The keystrokes stopped, and were quickly followed by the click of the laptop being closed. "Um, come in?" Kaori replied from inside.

Miyuki stepped inside to find Kaori sitting at her desk, the latched laptop in front of her and an odd blush rising in her cheeks. If Miyuki didn't know better (which she didn't, really), she'd think that the girl looked a little guilty at having been caught. "Good afternoon, my dear," she smiled, and unable to stop herself, she gave in to her curiosity. "What are you working on?"

"Oh! Um…" Kaori stammered, blushing a bit more now. "Nothing much. I've just been… putting down some… thoughts."

"Any sort of thoughts I should know about?" Miyuki asked, seating herself at the room's only other chair rather than on the bed. She couldn't deny that a flustered Kaori was a ridiculously cute Kaori. It was certainly better to see her like this than as the exhausted shell that had first set foot in this house.

"Um… well, you see… Tamao-chan - this world's Tamao-chan, of course - she and I have been e-mailing one another, and… she had a suggestion for me that I'm trying out."

Miyuki nodded, trying not to chuckle at the way Kaori had managed to avoid actually answering the question. "Poetry, then? Suzumi-san was very well known for that, if memory serves."

"Not exactly, it's more that…" Kaori stopped short, then took a breath that was obviously meant to center herself and looked up to meet Miyuki's eyes. "I'm writing a story."

"A story?"

"A story," Kaori repeated in a softer voice. "More specifically, I'm writing… *our* story. Mine and… *my* Miyuki's."

"I see," Miyuki nodded, trying not to let any of her concern show on her face. "Did Suzumi-san think this might be… therapeutic, somehow?"

"Not so much that," Kaori sighed, looking back at the hibernating laptop.

A long silence ensued, and Miyuki waited patiently, wanting the younger girl to say this in her own time.

"It was a *good* story," Kaori said at last, still not looking away from the desk. "It ended horribly, but before it all went to hell, Miyuki and I had a wonderful love story together. And now… that story never happened, and only exists in my head. I… can't let it stay there, Miyuki-san. I can't let it have all been for nothing."

"For nothing?" Miyuki said softly. "Kaori-chan, if it helped make you into the remarkable young woman sitting here with me today, it wasn't for nothing."

Kaori looked back at her and smiled sadly. "That's… just the sort of thing *she'd* say," she whispered.

"I'm glad to hear my other self was so sensible," Miyuki said, and then immediately wished she hadn't. In the end, of course, she had

been anything *but* that.

After an awkward pause, Kaori made a visible effort to try to make light of things. "When you knocked, I was writing one of the… um… good parts."

"Shall I leave you to it, then?"

"Oh, I can come back to it. Is there something you needed?"

Miyuki stood and shook her head softly. "I was only curious to see what you were up to. Please, don't let me interrupt you further. Far be it for me to interfere with a story that needs telling."

Kaori gave a tiny smile and nodded, and Miyuki bowed and excused herself from the room. Just before she left, though, she turned back to the other girl. "Kaori-chan?"

"Yes, Miyuki-san?"

"When it's finished… may I read it?"

The blush returned with a vengeance, and Kaori opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before regaining her composure. "Um, yes, of course… if you think you might… like to?"

"I think I'd like that very much," Miyuki smiled as she pulled the door to.

"Remon-chan?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm bored."

"And with those words, our doom is sealed," Remon sighed. "So what plans have you got hatching in that demented mind of yours *this* time, Kizuna-chan?"

The two third-years were spending the early afternoon sitting (or rather lounging) on the front steps of St. Lulim, soaking up a bit of late-summer sun and generally not doing anything at all. Remon had learned to enjoy these moments of peace while they lasted… which was generally not for very long.

"It's not a matter of having plans," Kizuna grumped. "I just wish something would happen, you know? Something… *unusual* ."

"I see. So you're asking the world to give us something strange?"

"I think the world owes it to us," Kizuna nodded. "Things can't just be school, school, school all the time, right?"

"We're in about twenty different clubs, Kizuna-chan."

"Well… yeah, but those are still part of daily life. They're not *weird* enough."

Remon cracked open one eye and regarded her frequent partner in crime. "The outfit you were wearing at the last Transformation Club? That was weird."

"You don't get it," Kizuna sighed. "Just something unexpected, like… remember when we first met Hazuki-senpai and Lilith-san? They just came walking out of the woods one day, and before you knew it, everything had changed, up to and including you and I getting some ninja training."

"Ninjas didn't use naginata," Remon reminded her.

Kizuna gently swatted her roommate's shoulder. "You're no fun today. Don't you think it would be cool if something else like that happened? If someone else just sort of walked out of the woods and…"

Her voice trailed off, and for a moment, Remon wondered if Kizuna might be giving up on this line of thought. It was only for a moment,

though, because the hand which had recently smacked her was suddenly gripping that same shoulder and shaking it. "Remon-chan!" Kizuna hissed.

"Hmm?"

" *There's someone coming out of the woods.* "

Remon sat up and blinked the near-sleep from her eyes. Kizuna was pointing out toward the nearby forest, where indeed a figure had emerged and was walking slowly across the grassy expanse. Even from this distance, Remon could tell that it was not a student, or at the very least was not wearing anything even remotely close to one of the standard school uniforms. "Okay, that's just freaky," she said quietly.

"Let's go see who it is!" Kizuna grinned, tugging Remon to her feet and all but yanking her the rest of the way down the stairs, off the walkway, and onto the wide lawn.

As they came closer, Remon began to pick out a few more details. First of all, the stranger was female, and rather tall: probably about Chikaru-onee-sama's height. Secondly, she was carrying something over her shoulder that looked an awful lot like a naginata. Third, she was definitely in costume of some sort, including a brown cloak that covered her head and shoulders.

The last detail seemed to have registered with Kizuna, who let out a squee and picked up the pace until she was practically running out to meet whoever this was. "Oh, my *God*, that's some of the best cosplay I've ever *seen!* " she shouted gleefully, obviously intending for her words to be heard by the newcomer.

The woman stopped at these words, and within moments, Kizuna pulled up to a stop right in front of her and began letting out little happy gasps as she took in every detail of her unusual outfit. It was a daring costume, Remon noted, showing a lot more skin than was customary for the Transformation Club. She was wearing what

looked like a black leather bandeau top, with matching sleeves that were belted on just beneath her shoulders, but not actually attached to the top itself. Her hands were wrapped in bandages from the wrists to the first knuckle of each finger. Beneath her bare midriff she wore a short, tattered gray skirt (not Spica-short, but close), and she had what looked like an honest-to-God white tiger pelt tied across her hips, acting almost as a second cloak. She wore heavy boots that were strapped all the way up each of her calves, and the whole pseudo-barbarian ensemble was topped off with what was indeed a naginata, but not like any that Remon had ever seen. The main blade was semi-serrated, and it had a secondary blade that gave it an almost an axe-like appearance, along with several lethal-looking spikes and a single inset red gem that shone like a malevolent eye in the sunlight.

"That… is… so… *cool!* " Kizuna squealed somewhere on the periphery. "Is that a real fur? How did you get that tattered look? This is some pretty hot stuff! If you're here for the Transformation Club, though, it met yesterday."

There was no reply from the stranger, who simply stared down at Kizuna expressionlessly. Her eyes, Remon noted, were a dark pink color, and the fringes of hair visible from beneath her hood were the same.

Kizuna barreled on ahead in spite of the silence. "So! Um, are you from Miator? Spica? I don't remember seeing you before, and… wow, I'm *sure* I would!"

While Kizuna was trying in vain to get some response from the woman, Remon crept around to one side to get a better look at the naginata. It was beautifully constructed, but there was something unnerving about it, beyond even the spikes and serrations.

"Um… *konnichiwa?* " Kizuna offered. "I'm Hyūga Kizuna. What's your name?"

Silence. Remon peered as closely as she could at the steel blades, wondering who would have gone to the trouble to make something as complicated as this. Whoever it was hadn't thought much about polishing it, though: it actually had kind of a dull finish to it, and the edges seemed to have a few little cracks and fissures emanating from them, stained with something dark and muddy.

"What we've got here is failure to communicate," Kizuna said, more to herself this time. "Um… *an nyeong? Ni hao?* "

This, finally, got a response from the stranger. " *Ni hao,"* she repeated in a soft, ragged voice.

"Ah, you're Chinese," Kizuna smiled nervously. "I'm terrible at Chinese. Remon-chan, please tell me you have a secret talent for speaking Chinese?"

Remon barely heard her, as she was still intent on the naginata blade, and a distant, dawning horror at what exactly might have caused it to have that worn look to it, and what *exactly* might be causing those stains in the cracks. She crouched down to pick a few blades of grass, then held one up gingerly toward the naginata's edge and ever-so-gently touched it against the metal.

The grass was effortlessly split by the sharpened edge.

"Remon-chan, do you know how to say anything other than hello in Chinese?" Kizuna asked again.

"Kizuna-chan," Remon said quietly, taking a small step back and pointing to the business end of the naginata. "Um, that thing's real." And, she did not say aloud, probably well-used.

"Oh," Kizuna said, her voice suddenly going quiet as well.

For a long moment, no one spoke, but then Remon ventured to break the silence. "So… you *must* be a friend of Hazuki-senpai."

At this, while the stranger's face did not exactly light up, there did seem to be a spark of recognition in her eyes. "Hazuki," she repeated.

Kizuna and Remon let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. "Well, of course," Kizuna grinned, rolling her eyes. "Do you want us to take you to Hazuki-senpai?"

"Hazuki," the woman nodded.

"Um, you'll want to wrap that up, though," Remon suggested, pointing to the weapon and then making a twirling motion with both hands. "I don't think you want one of the nuns to see it." For that matter, Remon was now becoming aware that there were a number of other girls watching them from a distance and whispering amongst themselves. Best not to attract any more attention than they already had.

"She doesn't speak Japanese, Remon-chan," Kizuna reminded her.

The stranger looked at Remon for a moment, then back over her shoulder at the naked blades, and then nodded as if she understood after all. With her free hand, she untied the tiger skin from her waist and very carefully wrapped it around the head of the weapon, then changed her grip so that it was held in front of her with the point down. "Hazuki," she said again.

"Okay, we'll find her," Kizuna smiled. "Lead the way, Remon-chan."

"You lead the way. You're the one who was asking for something strange to happen, remember?"

In spite of the conventional wisdom across Astraea that Hazuki, Chikaru and Tamao spent every waking moment together, this was simply not the case. They attended three different academies, for starters, and each had club activities and responsibilities that did not involve the other two. Even at meals, Chikaru was obliged to sit at

the head table with the Étoile and the other class presidents, leaving the other two to typically share a table with Nagisa, Yaya, and assorted members of the naginata team. From a purely statistical point of view, their time as three comprised a minority of daylight hours. As for non-daylight hours, well… that was even more fun for the rumor mill to speculate upon.

One constant in their routine, however, remained the shared martial arts practice. Along with the Saturday morning exercises on the soccer field, and the weekly meetings of *Kachou Kamen*, the three of them had fallen into the pattern of commandeering one of the smaller rooms in the gymnasium complex two afternoons per week, where they would work alternately with unarmed, blade and naginata styles. Some days would be spent recounting their day's trials to one another as they went though the steps and blows of their kata, but others would be spent in relative silence, moving in greater synchronization and harmony with each repetition. Some days, Hazuki liked to think, they would approach a level of inner peace where they could almost read one another's *Souma* without touching, allowing them to move as one simply by feeling for each other's presence.

This, however, was not one of those days.

Tamao dropped her shoulders and gave a frustrated sigh as she fell out of her stance. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm having the worst time focusing today."

"There's nothing to apologize for," Hazuki assured her with a smile. "Rough days are rough days. I'm not exactly in my Zen space either. It was hard to follow the sensei in class today… well, harder than usual, anyhow."

"Hmm, now that you mention it," Chikaru mused, "I'm feeling a bit distracted as well."

"Something in the air," Hazuki nodded, as she unscrewed the cap on her water bottle and took a drink.

Chikaru gave her an oddly intent look. "Possibly. Or… perhaps there's something happening on a wavelength that only the three of us can perceive?"

At this, Tamao looked slightly alarmed. "What do you mean, Chikaru?"

"I'm just saying that this is… an unfamiliar feeling," Chikaru explained, making a vague gesture with one hand. "It's not a matter of being distracted by classwork, or annoyed by school politics, or even driven to distraction by the two lovelies in my life." Tamao blushed, and Hazuki found herself chuckling at their poet's shy smile.

"No, this feels different," Chikaru went on. "And even as unfamiliar as it is, I'm sure I've felt it before. It just has a more… metaphysical flavor to it, if you will."

"A disturbance in the Force?" Hazuki joked.

Even as she said this, however, Tamao let out a gasp. "No, you're right," she whispered. "I *have* felt this before. Don't you remember, Hazuki-chan? The night we were watching anime with Chiyo, Remon, and Kizuna? This feels the same: it's like something's… *off*, somehow."

Hazuki's smile faded. "That was because of Kaori-san's arrival, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Tamao nodded. "I think maybe we were… feeling her presence coming into the book?" She was speaking in a hushed voice now, even though the three of them were alone in the sparring room.

"Do you think something happened to her?" Hazuki asked.

"Perhaps Eve and Lilith took her back to the Library?" Chikaru offered.

Hazuki shook her head. "Unless they found a way to get rid of their intruder, I don't think they would have…"

She was interrupted by the sound of the door to the room creaking open, accompanied by a familiar "Yoo-hoo!" as Kizuna poked her ginger head inside. "Oh, here you all are!" she grinned. "Hazuki-senpai, there's someone here to see you!"

"Here to see… me?" Hazuki repeated, exchanging confused glances with Tamao. "Who is it?"

"We were hoping you could tell *us*," Remon answered, having followed her roommate inside. She held the door open, and a third figure stepped through, this one a woman wearing a hooded cloak.

Hazuki felt her heart leap at the impossibility before her eyes as the cloaked woman slowly crossed the room toward her. She held a familiar polearm, with its blades wrapped in what looked like a tiger skin. She stopped a few meters away, then with her free hand reached up and drew back the hood of her cloak, shaking out her dark pink hair as she did. With this motion, two distinctive locks all but popped out from under the hood, then settled into a swept-back position, looking rather like either antennae or a pair of long plumes.

It was this last detail that shook Hazuki out of her near-trance, and she stared into the blank, expressionless eyes of someone who simply *could not* be standing there. "… Ren?" she whispered, taking a hesitant step closer.

With only the tiniest change of expression that might have hinted at a smile, Ryofu Hōsen reached into her cloak for something, then held it out to Hazuki. "This is… yours…" she said in a voice that was even softer than Hazuki remembered, rough and cracking as though with disuse.

Barely noticing her own actions, Hazuki reached to take what Ryofu was handing her. It was a faded blue and black mask in the shape of a butterfly's wings. One corner was badly cracked, as though it had

taken a blow. Which, of course, it had: a blow Hazuki remembered all too well. It was perhaps the closest she had come to death in her journey to find Hatsumi, and if not for the woman standing before her…

Tears springing to her eyes, her mind suddenly flooded by memory, Hazuki crossed the remaining distance between them and hugged Ryofu with all her strength. She heard the other woman's naginata fall to the padded floor as she went stiff in Hazuki's arms, and to her surprise, she felt her *Souma* roaring to life before rushing into Ryofu with all the force of a tidal wave.

With this, it suddenly dawned on Hazuki that in all the time she'd spent in Ryofu's world, they had never truly shared their *Souma* : Hazuki had not yet learned how, and it did not seem to be something that came naturally to the young general either. Apart from the moment of their initial contact, their energy had stayed confined within their individual shells.

Now, however, Hazuki was reminded of her reunion with Chikaru after the end of her quest, when the warmth of her dear friend's *Souma* had swept into the empty spaces within her, reawakening her own in the process. This time, she found that she was doing the same for her long-lost comrade-in-arms, with her rushing waters touching something faltering and dim within the other woman. Within moments, though, Ryofu's core of energy burst back to life, making Hazuki feel as though she had been suddenly struck by lightning.

Ryofu gave a single tiny cry of surprise and made as though to pull away from her, but Hazuki tightened her arms around the other woman, bringing one hand up to the back of her neck to allow the *Souma* to flow more readily between them. "It's okay, Ren, it's okay," Hazuki whispered. "Everything's fine. You're among friends."

After a long while, Ryofu placed her hands on Hazuki's shoulders and gently pressed the other girl back just enough so that they could meet one another's eyes again. That stone face was etched with emotion now, ranging from abject shock to an aching emptiness,

much as Hazuki had just felt inside her. Then, like the first tentative rays of a sunrise, Ryofu smiled a tiny smile, then leaned back in to rub the side of her face against Hazuki's, much as she had done when last they had seen one another.

Hazuki was vaguely aware of Chikaru gently ushering her two *kohai* from the room, while Tamao watched the reunion from a respectable distance, her face showing no small amount of confusion. Hazuki found her mind filled with questions, not to mention apprehension: why was Ryofu here? What was wrong with her voice, and her *Souma?*

There would be time for that later, though. For now, she closed her eyes and smiled, feeling the renewed energy of yet another long-lost sister from another world flowing through her.

Running, Kaname found, still brought her the closest she could get to inner peace, so she had found herself doing even more of it ever since that unfortunate incident with a couple of Hazuki's cervical vertebrae. She had been invited to join the others for martial arts practice today, but had begged off, preferring for now the isolation of a few trillion laps around the track. She knew that she should eventually take them up on their offer, and even consider putting in some time with Kojima-sensei again, but not yet. Karaoke and an uncomfortable meeting with the aforementioned kendō instructor notwithstanding, it was going to be a while before she could feel fully at ease around her three fellow pseudo-immortals after what she'd done.

A dozen or so kilometers of interval training later, with every second lap taken at a dead sprint, Kaname finished up with a brief cool-down, then made her way over to the water fountains to take a long drink and splash some cold water on her face. Then, for good measure, she stuck her head under the faucet and just let it pour over her, soaking her hair and giving her a good solid chill. When she could no longer stand it, she stood up straight and shook her head like a dog, spraying the area around her in the process.

It was only then that she realized that someone had been nearby. She looked over to see a tall man standing a couple meters away. He had short, bleach-blonde hair that in no way suited him, and was wearing a long gray coat and sunglasses, both of which were now splattered with droplets of water.

After a brief assessment in which Kaname reckoned that she could take him easily enough, she gave a derisive snort. "That's what you get for sneaking up on a girl on Astraea Hill, peroxide-san."

"Excuse me," the man said in a relatively high-pitched voice, taking off his sunglasses to wipe the lenses clean. "Are you Kenjō Kaname-san?"

His eyes, Kaname noted, were an almost disturbingly light blue color, and for a reason she could not put her finger on, she found herself ill at ease under that gaze. "Who wants to know?"

The young man (with the sunglasses off, Kaname realized he looked to be about her age, or maybe a year or two older) gave her a tight smile that had almost no warmth to it, then looked down at his shoes for a moment. "You may not remember me. It's been a while since I saw you last, and… well, I've just recently changed a few things." He ran a hand through his unnatural-looking hair by way of elaboration.

It was at that moment that Kaname made the connection, and she felt the sudden, almost overwhelming urge to be sick to her stomach. She had seen those eyes before: widened in numb horror, empty of anything but fear and revulsion at what was happening before them. "Hoshi-kun?" she ground out. "Saiga Hoshi-kun?"

He gave her a weary nod and another one of those smiles that failed to reach his eyes. "Can we… talk, Kaname-san?"

"Oh, *this* should be good," Kaname muttered.

As the sparring room was by its very nature a bit sparse on chairs or other furnishings, the four ended up sitting in a loose circle on the padded floor, with Hazuki and Ryofu opposite one another, and Chikaru and Tamao to either side. Ryofu's expression had once again faded to its normal inscrutable self, but Hazuki found it telling that she kept one hand joined with Hazuki's the entire time.

"I suppose I should start with introductions," Hazuki chuckled. "Ryofu Hōsen, these are my dear ones, who by some miracle have chosen to share their lives with me: Suzumi Tamao and Minamoto Chikaru. They're… like us."

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Ryofu-san," Chikaru smiled. "Hazuki-chan told us all about her time in your world. Thank you for taking care of her while she was with you." She offered a hand to Ryofu, who tentatively reached out to take it, adding a trace of fire to the water and electricity already swirling through them. Ryofu's eyes briefly widened, but then she nodded to Chikaru and gave her another of those hints of a smile.

"She did indeed," Hazuki nodded, setting her own free hand in Tamao's, so that all four of them could share the connection. "Ryofu taught me a lot about fighting… and about what's worth fighting *for* ."

Once Tamao's *Souma* joined them, however, Ryofu turned a look of muffled surprise upon the young Miatoran. She then released Hazuki's hand and reached over to very gently cup Tamao's cheek. "I know you," she whispered.

"You… you do?" Tamao asked.

Ryofu gave a tiny nod. "You… helped with… dragon," she said haltingly.

Tamao's face lit up, and she covered Ryofu's hand with her own. "I… I suppose I did, didn't I?" she blushed. "It was an honor, Ryofu-san."

"Thank you," Ryofu said with a slight bow of the head. She lowered her hand from Tamao's face, but the younger girl kept her own clasped with the warrior's.

To Hazuki's amusement, she saw that they had very nearly found their way into a complete circle, so she and Chikaru joined their free hands to finish the connection. "Ren," she asked, "it's wonderful to see you, but… why are you here?"

A line of concentration appeared between Ryofu's brows, and she turned her eyes back to Hazuki, some focus having returned to that gaze. "We're needed," she said simply.

Hazuki felt her pulse quicken. "They found the intruder? In the Library?"

Ryofu nodded. "Eve asked me… to help. I came… to ask you. Will you?"

Even as Hazuki took a breath to answer, Tamao beat her to it. "Of course we will."

"Tamao-chan," Hazuki whispered, turning to the younger of her two loves.

"Don't look so shocked, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru giggled. "Did you really think we were going to let you go without us?"

"But… *I'm* the one who promised," Hazuki insisted. "I didn't volunteer the two of you; it wouldn't have been my place to…"

"Hazuki-chan," Tamao interrupted her, with a bit of an edge creeping into her tone, "you were just talking about having learned what things are worth fighting for, weren't you? We're not letting you go into danger without us."

"You needn't argue, you know," Chikaru added. "Tamao-chan and I discussed this after you told us about your promise, and *we* made

the promise that we'd be there to look out for you."

"But…" Hazuki repeated, looking from one of them to the other. She was met only with determination in Tamao's eyes, then humor in Chikaru's, and she gave a short sigh in defeat. "I'm a Guardian, you know," she muttered.

"Isn't she cute when she's overprotective?" Chikaru winked across the circle at Tamao.

"Wait a moment, though," Hazuki said, looking once more to Ryofu as another detail occurred to her. "If Eve asked you… why are *you* here to ask instead of *her?* " Were they okay? Were they in danger already?

"I… *wanted* to," Ryofu answered simply, and then she lowered her eyes. "Wanted to… see you."

For a moment, Hazuki was touched by the admission, but she could tell that there was something Ryofu wasn't saying, even beyond her normal taciturn nature. If Ryofu had already encountered Eve, and had already traveled between worlds, why had her *Souma* been so dim upon her arrival? Surely being in Eve's presence would have… *recharged* her somehow, wouldn't it? Rather than press this, though, Hazuki turned back to the problem at hand. "How soon will we go? Do I at least have time to find Kaname?" Then, realizing that Ryofu would not know who this was, she elaborated with "She's another one of us, Ren. She told me she wanted to be involved when the time came."

"We have… some time," Ryofu nodded. "Hour or two."

"Okay," Hazuki smiled. That didn't leave her a lot of time to track down Kaname, but even so, she could no longer hold back the question she asked next, and she felt her smile deepen as she thought of the other dear friend she'd made in Ryofu's world. "Before I go, though… how's Chou'un doing? Have you seen her lately?"

Ryofu blinked at Hazuki. "She's dead."

And with those words said, Hazuki felt the world falling away beneath her.

Next: Afterimage

Afterimage

A thousand tides, a thousand waves

Takin' it all away

It'll come back in, we'll be gone by then

And it's a miracle we ever learned to live

-Indigo Girls

Part 14: Afterimage

Later, Hazuki would not be able to say that she blacked out, as such, but she could not tell how much time had passed before the *Souma* of her loved ones brought her back to the here and now. Even then, though, her mind held only one thought: *She can't be dead, she can't be dead, she can't…*

"How…" she heard herself say, as though from a great distance. "How did she..? Was it… in battle?" That seemed most likely, and Chou'un probably would have preferred to meet her end on the battlefield anyway.

A tiny shake of the head from Ryofu. "Disease," she said softly.

The answer was like a cold fist tightening around her innards. Even a warrior's death had been denied her. "I'm sorry, this is…" Hazuki whispered, looking away from those eyes even as her own began filling with numb tears. She felt Chikaru and Tamao squeezing her hands, but she could not look up at them, because she knew that once she did it would all be over.

Ryofu made a surprising sound, then: part growl and part sigh. "I'm sorry," she grated, and Hazuki could not help but look up at her then. Ryofu's normally blank face was once again a tangle of unfamiliar emotions, chief amongst them frustration. "I could have… said that more…" she fumbled for a word, "more… kindly. Not used to… talking to people anymore. Haven't spoken… since Chinkyuu died."

"I'm sorry, Ren," Hazuki whispered. She knew the name Chinkyuu from *Ikki Tousen*, not to mention from having now actually read *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and could only assume that "her" Ryofu had met her companion and strategist after she and Hazuki had parted ways. But that had been… what, a few months ago? A year at most? Could this loss have changed Ryofu so quickly?

"She had… a good, long life," Ryofu said slowly. "Chinkyuu did. But also Chou'un. Fought and lived at Kan'u's side through… many wars."

This was making less and less sense, and Hazuki groped for a realization that simply would not come. In the end, it was Chikaru who asked the relevant question. "Ryofu-san… how long has it been since you last saw Hazuki?"

Ryofu closed her eyes and looked deep in thought for a moment. "I… don't know, but… I think about… eighty years?"

For the second time in short succession, Hazuki felt the world spinning away, so she pulled her hands free and somehow clambered to her feet. "I… have to go…" she heard herself whisper. "Have to… find Kaname." And even though finding her fellow *Yami* was nowhere near a priority at that moment, at least this gave her the excuse she needed, and she half stumbled and half ran for the door.

Kaname stood with her hands on her hips and stared down the son of the man who'd raped her eight years before. "All right, go ahead and talk. I'm listening."

"Can we… maybe not talk out in the open?" Hoshi grimaced, looking around. "I'd… rather not be seen."

"Rather not be seen," Kaname nodded. "Which is of course why you wandered onto the campus of an all-girl school wearing a trenchcoat and sunglasses, with hair that can probably be seen from low orbit. You're not exactly scoring any ninja points here, Hoshi-kun."

"Look, it might be…" he snapped, but then rapidly composed himself. "It might be… *bad*… if someone were to see me here talking to you. I'm still not a hundred percent sure I'm not being followed."

"Oh, lovely," Kaname sighed. "Fine. Over here, then."

She led the way toward the shed where the track and field equipment was kept. After taking a look to make sure there weren't any of the usual bi-curious underclassmen trying to furtively sneak kisses, she motioned him to follow her around back. "This is as private a place as we're going to get," she said, turning to face him again. "No one here to see us but the woods." It occurred to her that she was baiting him a little, and she could not deny that a very dark part of her actually *wanted* him to try something, just so she could kick his ass.

"Okay," Hoshi nodded. He then took a long breath. "I guess you've heard about what our parents have in mind for us?"

"Wedding bells, a honeymoon, and a string of hopefully female heirs? Yeah, I've heard. And I suppose you're here to talk me into it?"

He frowned. "Kaname-san, I…"

"Because it's not going to happen," Kaname interrupted him. "You have about as much chance of marrying me as you do sprouting wings and flying to Mars under your own power, kiddo. I don't care about the money, I don't care about the power, and I don't care about the intimidation. I'm not the same little girl you knew years ago,

Hoshi-kun, and no one, *especially* anyone named Saiga, is *ever* going to force me into *anything* again, do you hear me?"

"Kaname-san, you don't understand…"

"What's there to understand?" she snarled. "If you think I'm going to…"

This time Hoshi was the one who interrupted. " *I don't **want** to marry you!"* he all but shouted, then made another visible effort to calm himself. "I… have no desire whatsoever to marry you, Kaname-san."

She stared dumbstruck at him for a few seconds. "Oh, Christ, don't tell me you're gay?"

"No," he said hurriedly, shaking his head. "Not gay at all. I just… don't want to marry *you* ."

In spite of herself, Kaname felt insulted at the denial. "Ohhh, I get it. I'm not good enough for you? Well, I *am* damaged goods. You know that better than just about anyone."

"That isn't what I meant," he grated. "What I meant was…" He worked his lips silently for a few moments, as though trying to either find the words or keep them in. "I couldn't do that to you, after what my father did. I was a child too, Kaname-san. I couldn't stop him from hurting you then…"

Hoshi looked anywhere but at Kaname, his face the very picture of barely suppressed emotion. "But I can stop this," he whispered.

Hazuki kept moving until she reached the roof of the gymnasium building, and only then did she stop for breath, hoping that maybe the afternoon wind would just blow through her and clear her head of these racing thoughts.

Eighty… years…

Only now that she was alone were the horrible implications beginning to set in. In spite of the fact that she didn't look as though she'd aged a day, Ryofu was somewhere around a hundred years old now. Possibly even older: Hazuki had no idea how old Ryofu had been when they had met, and had only assumed early twenties based on her appearance.

If eighty years had indeed passed, then it probably wasn't just Chou'un: most likely everyone Hazuki had met in that world was dead by now. Toutaku and Kaku, Kayuu-shogun… hell, even Sekito… and Ryofu would have witnessed it all, while she remained as young and vital as ever.

Only then did Hazuki realize that she was still carrying her mask. She looked at it more closely, and now that she knew what she knew, she could see the signs of age on it: the faded paint, the darkening of the cracked area that showed the weathering it had endured…

" *I'm sorry we never found your mask," Ryofu whispered, her tiny smile fading.*

" *It's okay," Hazuki assured her. "If it turns up, would you hold onto it for me?"*

" *I will."*

Had Ryofu scoured the battlefield looking for this lost mask? And then saved it for her all these years, hoping that one day she'd be able to return it?

Hesitantly, Hazuki held the mask close to her face. Even new, it had not been equipped with strings or a strap to fasten it to the face, but when Hazuki had put it on, it had stayed securely in place, as though held there by either magic or simply the force of Chou'un's personality.

" *Wear these into battle," Chou'un said, brandishing the blue mask before handing it to Hazuki, "and you will have the strength of a thousand! None shall be able to stand against your fury as you defend what is yours!"*

She could not deny, even now, that something transformative had happened when she had put the mask on. There had been magic in that world, after all: maybe some of it was left? Maybe there was some trace of the *Kachou Kamen* persona to be found?

She placed the mask to her brow.

Chou'un saluted her with a bao quan *gesture, a sign of respect between warriors. "Good travels to you,* Tsuki Kachou*," she winked.*

" *Thank you…* Hoshi Kachou*…" Hazuki bowed in return. "Thank you for everything."*

" *You can thank me by telling me how it all turned out when next we meet," Chou'un smirked.*

Had Chou'un ever completed her own quest? Ryofu said that Chou'un had lived and fought at Kan'u's side, but had it been only as warriors, or had Chou'un been able to confess her love for the black-haired bandit hunter she so admired? And had that love been returned?

She took her fingers from the mask, and it immediately fell from her face.

Hazuki sank to her knees and buried her head in her hands as the first sobs finally came.

"So, what are you going to do?" Kaname asked, still staring dubiously at the young man. "Are you going to tell your father you want some fresh meat?"

Hoshi leaned back against the back wall of the shed, then slowly sank to a seated position, as though he were quickly running out of gas. He rubbed his hands wearily over his face, then let out a long, slow breath.

Based on his sudden change of posture, Kaname could guess the answer. "But you can't do that, can you?"

"Not to his face, no," Hoshi said quietly.

Kaname stared at him for a while longer, then came up alongside him and sat down as well, leaving about a meter between them. "Can't stand up to the old man, then?"

"My father is a monster," Hoshi said, and now his voice was thick with emotion. "I know all too well what he put you through, Kaname-san, but… believe me: being his son, and his potential heir, is a very *special* form of Hell. So… no, I cannot refuse his wishes." He looked over at her and gave another humorless smile. "Not in the conventional manner, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked quietly.

"It means that I won't be what he wants me to be." He looked away, casting his gaze toward the trees. "I'm leaving the country, Kaname-san. I'm going to try to go somewhere that he'll never find me, so I can try to live my own life, instead of the one he would shape for me."

"Christ," she whispered. "I'm guessing he doesn't know?"

"Not yet," Hoshi snorted. "Then again, maybe he already does. I've been living under his watchful eye my entire life. He's bound to notice I'm gone sooner or later… probably sooner… and then he'll notice the missing money that I stole, and then he'll track down the car I rented and the flight I'll be booking…" He took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "But by then, if I'm lucky, I'll be long gone. Money can go some distance toward making me disappear once I'm

in Shanghai. From there, I'm thinking maybe America, maybe England… somewhere I can just… *be* ."

Kaname nodded slowly. At least now the bleached hair made sense, but there was something else that did not. "Hoshi-kun," she asked, "are you in danger?"

Another forced smile. "As they say in all the bad movies, Kaname-san… I know too much. My father won't let me go easily, so I have to make a quick exit."

"Then why, if time is of the essence, did you take a detour in your daring escape to come and see me?" she asked. "Were you maybe hoping I'd want to marry you after all? Because if you haven't heard the rumors yet, I'm queer."

He gave her a surprised look, which then faded to something more thoughtful. "Huh. I guess I can understand why you *would* be, after…"

"Oh, do *not* go there," Kaname growled.

Hoshi blinked at her a couple times, then shook his head. "No, Kaname-san, that wasn't why I came."

"Then why?"

After a moment of internal deliberation, Hoshi reached into his pocket and pulled out a small USB stick drive, which he held out to her. "I wanted to give you this."

Kaname took the nondescript object from him and turned it over with her fingers. "What is it?"

Hoshi spoke the next words with obvious difficulty. "It's… the *evidence*… of what he did to you that night."

Kaname's blood ran cold even as her *Souma* flared inside her, and she nearly dropped the device out of sheer revulsion. "Are you telling

me," she said in a low, dangerous voice, "that your sick *f*ck* of a father took pictures?"

"No, not pictures," Hoshi said, shaking his head. "He… took *video* ."

Tamao was not yet an expert on using her *Souma* to sense the presence of her loved ones, but she could feel it enough to follow Hazuki to the roof. The black-haired girl was sitting over by the edge, staring out toward the distant ocean, her mask held loosely in one hand and her hair trailing behind her in the light wind. Tamao approached slowly, then sat beside her. "I… brought your shoes," she said quietly, holding out the items in question.

"Thank you," Hazuki said with a tiny smile, accepting the shoes and slipping them on. "I… wasn't thinking this far ahead, to be honest."

"I don't blame you," Tamao sighed. After a pause, she went on. "Chikaru's still there with Ryofu-san. I think she's going to… well, she's going to be Chikaru, and try to put her at ease. Ryofu-san seemed… surprised when we told her that it hadn't been eighty years for *you*, as well. At least, I think she was. It was kind of hard to tell."

"Yeah, she doesn't tend to emote much," Hazuki nodded. "I suppose if Lilith were here she could give us the whole lecture on subjective time and book time and so forth, but… I guess time just moves differently in her world."

That had occurred to Tamao as well, though she did not like the potential implications at all. "I… hope it wasn't my fault, Hazuki-chan," she said quietly.

"How could this possibly be your fault?" Hazuki asked, turning a puzzled look on her. "Why would you even think that?"

"Because I helped Lilith-sama put that book back together," Tamao sighed. "I was there when the flow of time started again. What if I

made some kind of mistake, and..?" She broke off, unable to finish the thought.

"I don't think you did anything wrong," Hazuki assured her. "If the flow of time got screwed up, that's on Lilith, not you. Besides, if time moves faster for them, that might explain why it took Lilith a few months to come back for me when I was in that world: maybe for her it was only a day or two." She looked pained for a moment, then shook her head. "Anyway, I shouldn't have bolted like I did."

"You just had a terrible shock," Tamao assured her. "No one could blame you for that."

No reply was given, and Tamao turned her eyes toward the distant horizon as well. "I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan," she whispered. "I know Chou'un was… important to you."

After a pause, Hazuki began speaking in a soft, distant voice. "Just a few days ago Chikaru was telling me about how far I've come in accepting who and what I am: a woman who loves other women. There are three people in all the worlds I've traveled whom I can truly thank for that." She looked over and gave Tamao another wan smile. "Two of them are my girlfriends." The smile faded, and she looked away again. "Chou'un was the third. Even though we were never… intimate… she taught me a lot about what it is to be a lesbian. Not as much as she originally *wanted* to, perhaps, but…"

A soft chuckle escaped Hazuki then, and Tamao smiled along with her, even though she could not deny a twinge of uncomfortable emotions at this reminder of Hazuki's time in that world.

"Chikaru started me on the road by helping me accept that there was nothing wrong with what I am, and what I feel," Hazuki went on. "Chou'un took me further down that road, by arguing that not only was there nothing *wrong* with it, but that maybe it was the most *right* thing in all the world." She then smiled wistfully, again looking over at Tamao. "And then you showed me that both of them knew exactly what they were talking about."

Tamao nodded, still feeling that twist of discomfort at hearing another name beside hers and Chikaru's, but she pushed that aside, reminding herself chidingly that she had no room to be jealous, given her own past with Nagisa. Hazuki had just lost a dear friend, and there was no place for feelings like these.

"When I first started on the journey," Hazuki continued, "I didn't exactly go out of my way to make friends. I was too focused on Hatsumi for that. Even in later worlds, I always knew I'd be leaving soon, so it felt like there was no point in letting myself get close to anyone. Even in the few worlds that I made true friends, it wasn't as though I'd ever be able to visit, or send letters." She hung her head for a moment, then sighed. "Somehow, though? Deep down? I *always* thought that I'd see Chou'un again. It just seemed… impossible that I wouldn't."

As much as her heart was breaking at Hazuki's pain, the earlier thought of Nagisa was giving Tamao an even more uncomfortable feeling. "Hazuki-chan?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"What happened to Ryofu-san… it's going to happen to us too, isn't it?"

Hazuki nodded slowly. "I wish I could tell you otherwise, Tamao-chan, but… yeah, it probably is."

They sat in silence for a long while, then Hazuki slowly got to her feet. "I should go find Kaname," she said, half to herself. "Then I need to go back to the dorm for my sword and my *seifuku* . After that, I need to come back and apologize to Ryofu."

"Apologize?" Tamao repeated. "Why?"

"Because… I may have lost a friend today," Hazuki said quietly, "but someone who was a sister to me has lost everything she ever had, and all I could do was run away. Ryofu deserves better than that."

Tamao studied the hardening expression on Hazuki's face, then nodded in reply. "I should… find Nagisa-chan, and tell her that I'm leaving," she whispered. She was feeling an overpowering urge to hug her roommate… possibly for the next eighty years.

"I think that's a good idea," Hazuki replied, another momentary soft smile peeking through.

"Why," Kaname said in a voice that could cut steel, "did you bring this to me? Do you think I needed a f*cking *memento* ?"

"No," Hoshi denied, shaking his head quickly. "No, it's not that at all. That's why I called it evidence. I'm giving it to you so you can take it to the authorities… if that's what you want to do. I only ask that you give me a few days to get out of the country first." He rubbed his hands over his face, obviously trying to cover his nervousness. "There's plenty more that he's done… but I couldn't get any actual evidence for that. He keeps it all too well hidden, even from me." He gestured toward the stick drive. "He never bothered to hide that, though, so I grabbed a copy. I thought about bringing it to the police myself, but…" He shook his head, unable to complete the thought.

"So even though you know what he is, you still won't stand against him, eh?" Kaname nodded stiffly. "Goddamned patriarchy. Even with the hell he's put you through, he's got you pretty well trained, doesn't he?"

"No, Kaname-san," Hoshi said quietly, fixing his pale eyes on her. "I didn't want to drag you into a scandal against your will. I wanted it to be your choice. Something you might want to keep in mind, though…" He made a face, then looked away again. "Even if you take this to the police, my father is a rich, powerful businessman. You're a woman. This is the modern world we live in. I think you can connect the dots yourself. I may be a coward, but I know how this country works, and… if you're going to use this, you'll need to be ready for a fight that you may not be able to win."

Kaname wondered briefly if Hoshi had any idea the sort of fights she was now capable of winning. As much as she hated to admit it, though, he was right: a sword would be of no help to her here.

With a groan that made him sound much older than he actually was, Hoshi pushed himself to his feet, then offered his hand to Kaname to help her stand. Even though she did not need it, she accepted the gesture, which he then turned into a firm handshake. "I need to go. Good luck, Kaname-san. I… probably won't see you again."

"You're right," she snorted. "This *does* sound like a bad movie. Take care of yourself, Hoshi-kun."

He nodded and gave her the most genuine smile he had managed yet, though even then it was thin and a little haunted. "I'll leave through the woods," he said absently, then strode off into the trees.

"Hey, Hoshi-kun," Kaname called after him before he could disappear from sight. She waited for him to look back, then gave him a half-smile. "You turned out okay."

Hoshi bowed to her, then slipped on his sunglasses and hurried off into the woods, while Kaname clutched the "evidence" in her hand, trying to process everything that had just happened.

Now what?

In the end, she didn't get very long to think about it, because shortly after she emerged from behind the shed and started walking back toward the gymnasium complex, she heard Hazuki's voice. "Kaname!"

Her fellow *Souma* -bearer jogged up to her, still dressed in her sparring *gi* . "I… have just had a *very* surreal afternoon," Kaname told her.

"I know the feeling," Hazuki said grimly.

There was something strange about her voice, and when Kaname looked more closely at her, she noticed something else: something even more unexpected. "What the hell… have you been crying? What happened?"

Hazuki looked away. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Uh, one damned second here," Kaname said, holding up one finger. "You *do* remember what happened the last time that *I* said I didn't want to talk about it, right?"

"Yeah," Hazuki nodded, reaching to scratch the back of her neck in what Kaname hoped was just a reflex action. She then let out a short sigh and looked at Kaname again. "I just found out that a friend of mine died."

"I'm sorry," Kaname said automatically. "Was it… anyone I know?" Hazuki had once claimed to have no friends at all in her previous life, after all. She couldn't mean someone at the school, could she?

"No one you know," Hazuki said quietly. "I think I may have mentioned her name a few times, but…" She paused to take a slow breath. "I'll tell you all about it later, I promise. I came looking for you because Eve and Lilith found the intruder in the Library. Are you busy?"

"Not too busy for that," Kaname nodded, feeling her *Souma* once again rumbling to the surface. Maybe she was going to get to win a fight today after all.

"I'm going back to my room for my fighting gear," Hazuki told her. "Bring what you think you might need and meet us in sparring room number three in half an hour."

Half an hour (and a gut-twisting journey through the space-time continuum) later, Kaname found herself once again in the Great Library, where the first thing she saw was the enormous blue eye of

the Hat of the Keepers. She then looked slightly lower to see the face of a very gleeful Lilith. "Hazuki-chan! You came! And you brought Kaname-chan too! And…"

Lilith paused, looking for all the world like she was counting heads. "Tamao-chan and Chikaru-chan, as well?" She looked puzzled for a moment, then her face lit up. "Ooh, perfect! This makes the plan even better, with all five of you here! Come on, Eve's upstairs. Follow me!"

Kaname took a look around at the others, who were largely unchanged from their own world (save for the presence of Hazuki's sword), then at herself: her new sparring gear had once again transitioned into samurai armor, and her bokken was once more a katana with a dragon-head pommel. She smiled to herself: it felt pretty damned good to be back.

"So what's the situation?" Hazuki asked, sounding very businesslike as the small crowd followed Lilith through the endless stacks. "What are we dealing with?"

"Well, we caught it quickly enough that it's only managed to infect a single book," Lilith explained. "We've got that book isolated, and if we're lucky, our little sneak won't have figured out yet that we're onto it."

"What sort of creature is it?" Chikaru asked. "Would it be too easy to assume it's another dragon?"

"Unfortunately, we don't know its exact form," Lilith frowned, leading the way up one of the spiral ramps that connected the different levels. "It's probably going to be watching for us, so if it senses something as powerful as me or Eve reading along, it might do something drastic."

"Okay, define drastic here," Kaname spoke up. "From what Hazuki told me, it's already rotting the book from the inside, isn't it?"

"Yes, and growing more powerful as it does," Lilith nodded grimly. "Its plan was probably to infect other books once it finished the job. I'm worried that if it knows we're onto it, though… it might give up on its plans and just… destroy the entire book."

No one said anything to this. Based on previous encounters with the Maker goddess, Kaname was more than aware of how protective she was of her books. To have one actually *destroyed*…

"Pardon me, Lilith-sama?" Tamao-chan asked at last. "We'll be going *into* the book, though, won't we?"

Lilith shook her head. "Not all of you should go: just Ryofu-chan, Hazuki-chan and Kaname-chan. Chikaru-chan's presence might tip our hand because of her *Souma* type, and Tamao-chan, you'll be doing a very important job on the outside."

"But… what happens if the world is destroyed while they're inside?" Tamao asked, obviously fearing the worst. Kaname couldn't really blame her for that, as she'd been wondering the same thing.

"That's exactly what *you're* here for, Tamao-chan," Lilith smiled at the Miatoran girl, putting an arm around her waist and giving her a brief side-hug. "If everything goes to hell, you'll be their ticket out. I'll explain it all to you before we start. You'll be doing the job that I was going to do, but having you do it instead of me should make it *much* safer for everyone."

By this time they had reached what Kaname assumed was the "main" level of the Library, or at least the one with the kitchen on it. Here, not far from where they had encountered Ken-chan and the hat during their previous trip, they instead found Eve kneeling on the floor, with a single book open in front of her. Kaname could immediately tell that this one was their destination: the visible pages were markedly decayed, and the writing, along with being illegible as always, appeared to be quite a bit more faded than it was in the few open world-books Kaname had seen thus far.

"You came," Eve smiled up at Hazuki before letting her bottomless eyes sweep over the rest of the group. "Thank you."

"I promised I would, didn't I?" Hazuki smiled at her former sister, though unless Kaname missed her guess, she looked a little uncomfortable as she did. "I'll be right back; I'm going to get changed." She then headed off toward the kitchen, a bundle of blue and white fabric still clutched under one arm. Kaname nodded to herself as she recognized it. Fighting gear, indeed.

"Okay, I need to go over the plan with you, Tamao-chan," Lilith said then, taking the younger girl's hand. "Let's go over here and talk Maker to Maker." As she began to lead Tamao away, she looked over her shoulder at Kaname and winked. "Oh, and Kaname-chan? As sexy as you look in that armor, you're probably going to want to go lightweight for this trip."

Somewhere off to the side, the kitchen door opened a crack, and a squawking Ken-chan sailed through, moving entirely too quickly to be self-propelled.

"Is there anything I should know before we start?" Chikaru asked, kneeling beside Eve.

"As a matter of fact, there is," Eve nodded, and then she stood and led Chikaru away to the other side, no doubt discussing Healer business far beyond the understanding of mere immortals of the hack and slash variety.

This left Kaname alone with the new girl, with whom she had not yet exchanged a word: they had departed almost immediately upon her arrival at the sparring room, and there had barely been time to notice that there was a pink-haired, tattooed woman in little more than a leather swimsuit top and a short skirt there with them.

"I don't think we were properly introduced," Kaname nodded to her after taking off her helmet. "I'm Kenjō Kaname."

"Ryofu Hōsen," the other woman said in a soft voice that was very much at odds with her appearance.

Kaname blinked for a moment as she placed the name. " *Ikki Tousen?* " she asked.

"Thank you," Ryofu nodded to her. "I've been told as much."

Before Kaname could ask what she meant, Hazuki emerged from the kitchen, dressed in the *seifuku* she had worn for their last otherworldly trip. "You know, that shirt's way too short for you now," Kaname noted as the younger girl approached.

Hazuki gave a non-committal shrug. "Whatever. I've got nice abs."

Kaname chuckled, as she honestly could not argue that point, and at least it looked like Hazuki was holding onto a little bit of her sense of humor.

They were soon rejoined by the others, and Lilith briskly slapped her hands together. "Okay, just a few more precautionary preparations, and then we can do this."

"Is there anything else we should know before we go in?" Hazuki asked. "Or it is just a matter of finding the monster and killing it?"

"There *is* more, yes," Eve sighed. "You see… this world has a *Souma* -bearer."

"Who is it?" Hazuki asked, frowning. "Lilith, did we go to this world?"

Lilith shook her head, then looked over at Eve, who went on speaking. "As much as it pains me to say this… I don't know who it is," the younger goddess sighed. "Obviously someone was in my presence when I left that world, but… it must have been without my knowledge."

"So along with killing the monster, you need to find the *Souma* -bearer and protect her," Lilith continued. She then put her head to

one side, pondering this. "Or him, I suppose, though it almost always seems to be a her, doesn't it? Anyway, whoever she is, she's going to be in significant danger. Or he."

"So protect the *Souma* -bearer, and find and kill the monster whose form you don't know," Kaname summed up. "Should be a breeze. Anything else? What should we expect once we're inside?"

"It's what you'd consider a modern world, very much like your own," Lilith replied, but then quickly amended herself. "Well, not like yours, Ryofu-chan, sorry. We'll even be dropping you right into Japan, so most of you should feel right at home." She then took on another pondering look, this time with her head to the other side. "Everything always seems to happen in Japan anyway, doesn't it?"

"Things are… going to be in quite a bit of chaos there, though," Eve grimaced. "I can sense enough to tell you this much: the invader is using its power in the form of a blood-borne disease which is rapidly sweeping through the population."

"A plague?" Chikaru asked, looking repulsed at the idea.

"Not… exactly," Eve sighed. "It's a disease that.. kills the host and rots the mind, but… the body itself remains active, and then seeks to spread the disease by… feeding on the living."

There was a long, heavy silence, and Kaname felt a mix of dread and sheer annoyance rising within her. She turned to her partner in dragon-slaying and sighed. "Zombies? For f*cksake, Hazuki, you know I hate zombies…"

Next: Boon

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The adventures of the Yami trio in zombieland will be told as a separate story, with chapter 15 of Strange Fire

dealing with the aftermath. Please keep an eye out for "Koiyamiberry of the DEAD" - coming soon(?) to… well, somewhere near here.

Meanwhile, for blogging, meta, and general anxiety, please come visit us at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook!

Boon

AUTHOR'S OPENING NOTE: This chapter takes place after Koiyamiberry of the DEAD. Which I have not written yet, because this felt more important somehow. There are no spoilers here except for the fact that our heroes survived, which isn't really a spoiler because, well, Epilogue. (I suppose it's a spoiler that Ryofu survives, but if you thought I re-introduced her just to kill her off in zombieland, you don't know me very well…)

.

I got all this in between, something I did not foresee

All the deals I made don't matter if I can't just let you be

Gone again, gone again

There ain't no way that I'm gonna let this heart mend

Gone again

-Indigo Girls

Part 15: Boon

"Hatsumi?"

"Yes, Hazuki-chan?"

"Do you mind if I ask a silly question that probably has no relevance whatsoever?"

Eve chuckled lightly at the girl by her side as they strolled slowly amongst the endless bookshelves. "I find it hard to believe that any

of your questions would be irrelevant, but ask away."

"Well… it's about my *seifuku*," Hazuki went on, waving one hand over the old school uniform that she was still wearing. "This thing has gotten ripped, stained, practically shredded on occasion, and now most recently coated in zombie goo, yet every time I come back to the Library it's as good as new. Why is that?"

"There, you see?" Eve grinned. "There's nothing at all irrelevant about that question. Think of it as self-perception, Hazuki-chan. When you travel to the Library, you are for those moments bathed in the energy of creation. It's almost like a tiny rebirth, and when you reappear, your perception can have an effect on your own personal reality."

Hazuki pondered this for a moment. "That would explain why Kaname keeps showing up in samurai armor, I guess, but… I always just reappeared as me, the same as before."

"Perhaps you never needed to be anything other than what you were," Eve said gently. "Perhaps even then, with all your conflict and self-doubt, you knew, somewhere inside, that Azuma Hazuki was someone worth being, and worth returning to."

"I'll… have to take your word for that part," Hazuki said with a wry smile, reaching around to scratch the back of her neck absently. "But then again, you're the one who knows when hearts are true, right?"

Eve allowed herself a cheeky grin. "And don't you forget it."

"Whatever the reason, I'm just glad to have the stink of the undead off of me," Hazuki waved. "I'd have a hard time explaining that one at the cleaners."

The younger keeper felt the lightness of the mood leave her as she once again thought of what her one-time adopted sister had done on her behalf. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Hazuki-chan."

"I volunteered, remember?" Hazuki replied in a soft voice, and for just a moment Eve was reminded of the adoration that voice had so long held for her, had she but taken the time to notice. Then, just as quickly, the moment passed, and Hazuki went on speaking in a more casual tone. "At least I didn't die this time, right? There's an improvement right there. Less work for you, too."

"That… isn't funny, Hazuki-chan," Eve said darkly, casting her gaze to the stone-tiled floor.

"I'm sorry," Hazuki sighed, and there was that warmth in her voice again. "I guess I'm a little more irreverent than you remember. Sometimes it's the best way I can think of to deal with how strange things have become in my life."

Eve paused in her stroll, vividly remembering the feeling of holding her Hazuki-chan's fading life in her hands as she used her powers to piece together the girl's broken and maimed body after her fight with the Devourer. Every shattered bone, every fragment of torn flesh and splatter of blood, every crushed organ… all of it had been Eve's fault.

"Hatsumi?" Hazuki asked, turning to stand before her.

Forcing a smile, Eve looked up at the much taller girl. "There's something I need to talk to you about, Hazuki-chan," she said in a brisk voice, forcing the conflicting emotions to the back of her mind. "I'm very thankful for what you did on my behalf."

"And I'll do it again if need be," Hazuki smiled.

The look on her face made Eve's heart ache with guilt, both for what had come before, and for what could very well happen soon. Again, she forced those feelings aside. "Thank you, Hazuki-chan, but… let's not think about that now."

"Fair enough. So what did you want to talk to me about?"

Eve nodded to herself. "Now that we're here, I suppose I should do this properly." She cleared her throat and spoke in her best Keeper voice. "Azuma Hazuki, you have done a great service to creation, and to the Keepers of the Great Library. It is thus in our power to offer you… a boon."

Hazuki blinked. "A boon?"

"A reward for your actions," Eve elaborated, speaking once again in a normal voice. "Something for you, Hazuki-chan. Ask a favor, and if it is within our power to grant it, we will."

Eve saw a spark of hope in Hazuki's eyes, and knew all too well what it meant. "There are… restrictions, I'm afraid," she went on before Hazuki could speak, "and laws that I am not able to break even when I am in the debt of a mortal such as yourself."

"Oh," Hazuki said, sounding a little dazed. "Then… you can't…"

"No, Hazuki-chan," Eve finished for her, shaking her head sadly. "I can't bring her back."

Hazuki stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "That makes sense," she said softly. "Chou'un lived out her life and died. I guess her story's told."

"It was a good story," Eve tried to reassure her. "I'm sure Ryofu-chan will be able to tell you more of it." She smiled to cover her own dark thoughts, knowing all too well that she was not being entirely honest with Hazuki, but it would be cruel to tell her what had actually happened to Chou'un, especially since Eve did not truly understand it either.

Yet again, Eve found herself forcing those uncomfortable thoughts aside so that she could focus on this mortal girl who had come to mean so much to her. "So, Hazuki-chan… what favor can we grant you?"

Hazuki stared fixedly at one of the nearby shelves for a long while. "Maybe… some closure?" she said at last.

"Closure?" Eve repeated, feeling her heart leap momentarily. "In… what sense, Hazuki-chan?"

"I've always…" Hazuki began, but then she broke off and shook her head. "I'm very happy, where I am now. I love my new life, and the people I share it with. But in the back of my mind… in the back of my heart, really… there are regrets that still nag at me, and I'm afraid that if I don't find some sort of closure, I'll never fully be at peace." She crossed her arms over her chest for a moment, then turned her aching blue eyes onto those of the younger goddess. "Maybe you could help me with that?" she asked tentatively.

A few seconds passed in which Eve forgot to breathe. For that long moment, she felt the weight of her hundreds of mortal lives crushing out the all-knowing nature of the immortal life-bearer, and she found that she could not "hear" Hazuki's intentions over the noise of her own wishes. Did Hazuki truly want this of her as well? "Ask me anything," she said again, struggling to keep her voice level.

Hazuki nodded, and then closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. "It's about our parents," she said quietly. "That is to say, my parents of birth: the ones who raised us back in the world where I came from."

"What of them?" Eve asked, feeling an uncomfortable surge of disappointment, which she again tried to push aside. This would not do at all.

"Sometimes it's hard to be happy in my new life when I think of the one I left behind," Hazuki went on. "Our parents lost both of their daughters on the same day, gone without a trace, and they'll never know what happened to us. What kind of hell have they been through? Sure, they were distant and always occupied with work, but they don't deserve that." She refocused her eyes on Eve. "Is there anything we can do about that? Could we maybe go into that world

to see them again, and tell them… *something* of what happened to their daughters?"

Eve nodded in understanding, and for a moment felt a pang of shame that she had never told Hazuki this, either. "Come with me, Hazuki-chan," she whispered, extending her hand to the other girl.

Hazuki followed Eve to another level of the Library, and down an increasingly familiar path toward the bookcase which held her adopted world. Rather than stop here, though, Eve led her to another shelf further down the circular path and on the opposite side. "Here it is," Eve said, pulling a book from that shelf. "This is the world of your birth, Hazuki-chan."

"I had no idea it was so close," Hazuki said, glancing back toward the one she now called home.

Eve smiled silently, then opened the book to a half-written page. After furrowing her brow in concentration for a moment, she began to page backward. Hazuki watched wordlessly, not wishing to interrupt her work.

"Right about… here," Eve said at last, tracing her finger over the incomprehensible text, then laying her hand over the page. "This is something I should have shown you a long time ago, Hazuki-chan," she said with a smile that looked a little sad, "so you needn't ask this for your boon. Place your hand over mine."

Confused, but no less curious, Hazuki did as the goddess asked, laying her hand over Eve's. There was a rush of *Souma* at this touch, flowing from their two hands to the book and back again, and Hazuki felt the Library fading away as her sight went green.

"We will not be traveling into the book itself, Hazuki-chan," came Eve's voice on the periphery. "We will merely be watching."

"Watching what?" she asked, but the scene was already fading back in to reveal a familiar rooftop: St. Feminine, the private high school for girls which she and Hatsumi had attended. This had been a favorite spot for Hazuki to eat lunch and be alone with her thoughts, and there in the familiar spot near the stairwell, Hazuki saw herself.

Only this time, she was not alone. Another girl sat beside her, alternating between eating her own lunch and chatting with Hazuki, all the while shooting her looks of absolute adoration. It took a while for Hazuki to recognize her, and even then she could not place her name: she was a *kohai* who, one week before Hatsumi's disappearance, had offered Hazuki a present before fleeing in terror and shyness, only for Hazuki to toss the gift into the trash unopened, never giving it another thought.

"This is… the past?" Hazuki whispered. "But this… this never happened!"

"Just listen, Hazuki-chan," Eve whispered in reply.

With that, it was as though the picture slowly gained its audio feed, and Hazuki heard her own voice speaking in a relaxed, casual, even happy tone.

" *You can ask me anything, Risa-chan, really."*

The younger girl paused for a moment, obviously still nervous around her senior, but then ventured her question. "I'm just curious, Hazuki-senpai… how much do you really remember from… before? It can't possibly all be gone, can it?"

Hazuki shook her head. "Not all of it, no. It's the strangest thing, really: I remember knowledge, like language and math and other things I learned at school, not to mention certain… fundamental truths about myself." Here she paused and leaned in to touch foreheads fondly with the girl at her side, making Risa blush hotly. "I just don't remember people or events from my own life."

" *Does that… bother you, senpai?"*

" *A little bit, but… for the most part, I like who I am, even if it feels like I've only been alive for a few months."*

If anything, Risa's blush deepened, but then she frowned pensively and turned away.

" *What is it?" Hazuki asked gently.*

" *Forgive me, senpai. It was a… shameful thought."*

" *Tell me," Hazuki insisted, her voice still as gentle as before.*

Risa's face went through several difficult expressions before she dared look back to Hazuki. "I was just thinking… that I like who you've become as well."

" *And how is that shameful?"*

" *It's just that… before the… accident… you were always so aloof, senpai. I was far from the only one who ever tried to confess to you, but you held yourself apart from everyone. I never dared to believe that you could return my feelings, but I suppose I took comfort in thinking that you would never return anyone else's feelings either, so it wasn't that there was something in particular wrong with me or anything, but…"*

" *You're rambling," Hazuki smiled mischievously.*

" *What I'm trying to say, senpai, is that… this has been a miracle for me, but it's a selfish miracle, and…" She paused, struggling for the words, and in the end she had to look away to say them. "And even as much as I… love you, senpai… I wish this had never happened, so that you could have your sister back."*

Hazuki stared at her for a few seconds, then took a quick look around to ensure that they were still alone before pulling Risa in

close and kissing her on the top of the head. "You're adorable, Risa-chan. And sweet beyond words."

" *Do you… do you miss her, senpai?"*

" *That's a harder one to answer," Hazuki sighed. "I'm told she was a wonderful girl, but I barely remember her, so I guess I miss having memories of her more than I miss her, if that makes any sense. I've seen pictures, I've even seen videos, but… I only have the faintest sliver of a memory of Hatsumi herself."*

Risa cuddled against her, still unable to meet her eyes. "Would you… tell me that memory, senpai?"

Hazuki rested her chin atop the smaller girl's head and pondered this. "It's… sort of the first memory I have now, really. It was just before I woke up in the hospital after the accident. I felt like I was… in darkness for a long time. Honestly… I think I might have been dead."

" *Senpai…" Risa shivered against her.*

" *But that was when I saw her," Hazuki went on, her voice dropping to just above a whisper. "Golden hair, with those red bows they say she always wore, eyes shining like polished carnelian stones, a gentle smile… She was holding me, and keeping me safe. She pulled me out of the darkness, and bade me open my eyes again. That was when I woke up from my coma. That was when they told me that my sister and I had been in a terrible accident, and that was when they told me that she had been killed. I had no memory of having a sister, so they showed me her picture, and I knew it had been the girl I'd seen… the one who pulled me out of the darkness." Hazuki gave a soft, sad smile. "I don't know how, Risa-chan, but I honestly believe her spirit saved me before she went on to… wherever it is we go when we die. Even though I don't remember Hatsumi past that, I know I'll always be grateful to her."*

" *So will I," Risa whispered as Hazuki tightened her arms around her.*

The scene dissolved as Hazuki rocked back on her heels, wrenching her hand away from the book she had once called home. "Who… who *is* she?" Hazuki asked in a low, bewildered voice.

Eve closed the book and placed it back upon its shelf. "That," she said gently, "is the Azuma Hazuki who was born in the world you now call home."

Hazuki shook her head slowly. "It can't be. She… she *died* . I *replaced* her."

"No, Hazuki-chan, you didn't. You *saved* her."

Feeling that her legs were about to give way beneath her, Hazuki staggered back to lean against one of the pillars between the bookcases. "I don't understand."

"When you fell from the Universal Garden, you were drawn to the world in which you felt you would be most welcome. As you entered that world, you were drawn to your other self in her dying moments, but you didn't replace her: you *joined* with her. You shared with her your strength and health, you took on the painful memories of her lonely life, and in so doing you drew her back from the death she sought." Eve paused and gave her a faint smile. "You briefly held her life inside you, and then after I spent that last night with you, I took her with me as I left."

"Then… why doesn't she have *my* memories?" Hazuki asked.

"I couldn't have done that even if I'd wanted to," Eve replied. "Your memories were connected to your *Souma*, so I suppressed those inside you, and left you with hers as well. That way you could live a life of miraculous recovery even if you never found Chikaru-chan again, and your other self could begin anew as a blank slate, with no memory of either her lifelong illness or the tragic loss of a sister she never knew."

"So… my parents…" Hazuki whispered.

Eve nodded, finishing the sentence for her. "Still have a daughter whom they have come to love and cherish very much after nearly losing her. They are saddened by her loss of memory, but are determined now more than ever to make *new* memories *with* her. And while they mourn their daughter by adoption, who left them too soon…" Eve looked away, her eyes half-lidded as she went on. "Considering how many families I abandoned without giving a second thought to how my disappearance would affect them, the least I could do was give our mother and father some form of closure, even if it meant leaving a lifeless shell of myself and arranging for the accident which 'claimed' me."

After a long pause in which Hazuki did not speak, Eve sighed and resumed the narration. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Hazuki-chan. I don't know if this eases your mind at all, but our parents have mourned one daughter, and learned to love another more than ever."

Hazuki shook her head, feeling strangely ill at these revelations. "This is… I… I think I need to be alone for a moment," she whispered roughly, before turning and walking away from the goddess, her mind simply spinning.

"A boon?" Tamao asked, blinking her eyes in confusion. "What do you mean, Lilith-sama?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Lilith grinned over the rim of her teacup before taking a sip. "You did *us* a favor, so now we get to do *you* a favor. We owe you one. It's not a perfect genie-wish or anything like that, but I'm sure if we put our heads together, you and I, we can come up with something suitable for you, don't you think?"

Tamao set her own cup down on the kitchen table and thought about this for a moment. She'd had wishes and dreams all her life, but to suddenly be presented with this potential reality made all such thoughts flee her. Instead, she found her mind turning to a question

she'd been meaning to discuss with Lilith since her arrival. "Then… may I ask you something, Lilith-sama?"

"Sure, but you don't need a boon to do that. Questions are free, unless it's forbidden knowledge. What do you want to know?"

"It's about… Ryofu-san's world. The one you and I put back together the last time I was here. I'm… not sure how much help I was, of course."

Lilith rolled her eyes and briefly stuck out her tongue. "Pfft. You helped more than you know, Tamao-chan. Don't be down on yourself: you're a natural at this stuff."

"Yes, well… that's what concerns me," Tamao sighed. She clenched her teeth for a moment and stared at her cooling tea, not daring to look up into Lilith's eyes. "I can't help wondering if I made some kind of mistake. Hazuki-chan left that world only a few months ago, by her reckoning, but now eighty years have passed for Ryofu-san, and everyone else Hazuki-chan knew in that world is probably dead." At this point she forced herself to look up at Lilith. "Did I do that, Lilith-sama? Did I somehow alter the flow of time when we were repairing that book?"

Lilith sat back in her chair and studied Tamao's face for a few moments. "The fact that you're aware that such a mistake could have been made is impressive in itself, Tamao-chan, but… no, you didn't do anything wrong." She began making vague, spinning gestures in front of her with both hands. "This is normally when I'd have to resort to the whole timey-wimey ball talk, but to spare you the gory details, I'll just say that different books move at different speeds, and even *that* can be variable on a world-by-world basis. Some of them are constant, and others speed up and slow down seemingly at random." She then leaned forward again, and gave Tamao a soft, reassuring smile that seemed almost out of character. "So relax. You aren't to blame for this. No one is."

Tamao nodded slowly. While she had to admit to some relief at Lilith's answer, though, she was more than a little unsettled at the idea that such a mistake had been possible. "Lilith-sama," she said slowly, "I think I know what I'd like to ask of you."

"Oh?" Lilith smiled, propping her elbows on the table and setting her chin in her hands. "Then pray tell, what can this goddess do for you, Tamao-chan?"

"It's… about my *Souma*," Tamao said hesitantly. "You've said it's like yours: it's the power of the Maker."

"That it is."

Tamao swallowed hard. "Can you… Lilith-sama, can you… teach me more about how it works?"

For just a moment, Lilith looked surprised, but then a slow smile spread across her face. "Ahhh, I see," she nodded. "I suppose it's only natural that you'd be curious. You've seen Chikaru-chan putting her healing skills to good use, you've seen the Terrible Trio hacking monsters to bits, and you're wondering where you fit in, aren't you?"

Tamao was about to answer, but Lilith leaned closer and went on speaking. "Surely you've begun to see it in the world around you, haven't you, Tamao-chan? The patterns of creation? The flow of time? The ways in which *everything* is interconnected? It's heady stuff, isn't it? And as a Maker, it's not just there for you to watch, you know… you could reach into it with both hands and do *incredible* things. Your power is what *miracles* are made of, my dearie. Healing? Fighting?" She gave a dismissive wave. "Decent stuff, but for a true Maker aware of her full powers, *anything* is possible, bounded *only* by your imagination."

The elder Keeper rose from her seat then and slowly came around the table to stand over Tamao, her piercing violet eyes never leaving those of the younger girl. "Is that it, then, Tamao-chan? Do you want me to unlock the mysteries of creation for you, so that you can bend

time and space to your will? Do you want to show the laws of nature that they're merely guidelines for you? Do you want to know the secrets to making reality jump at your very whim?"

Mouth dry and eyes wide under that immortal stare, Tamao could only shake her head and squeak out "N-no, Lilith-sama."

Lilith's face once again took on a look of surprise. "No?"

"No," Tamao repeated, pausing a moment to clear her throat. "Lilith-sama… I want to know how my *Souma* works… so that I know how to *not* do those things."

For many ticks of the distant, ever-present clock, goddess and mortal stared at one another, and then Lilith extended her hand to Tamao. The young poet took it, and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet, after which Lilith enfolded her in a soft, warm embrace. "Well done, Tamao-chan," the Keeper whispered into her ear, and to Tamao's surprise and relief, she sounded *proud* . "Your boon is granted. You'll have your lessons. It'll be slow going, but we'll get you there."

"Thank you, Lilith-sama," Tamao whispered in reply, returning the hug.

"I'm afraid I haven't been explaining it properly, then," Eve smiled at Chikaru. "This boon is for *you*, Chi-chan. It's admirable that you keep asking me to do things for others, but our debt is to you, and we have to use our power appropriately to balance those scales."

Chikaru nodded, chuckling softly to herself as she looked down into the fathomless depths of the Library's central atrium. "I suppose it's gotten to be a habit. I don't want to be selfish."

"Accepting our gratitude for the risks you took on our behalf is hardly *selfish*, little sister."

"Very well, then. Since I can't think of anything else… at least anything *reasonable*… maybe you could reward me with some information?"

"What sort of information?"

Chikaru paused for a moment, wondering if she really wanted to ask this, as she did not know how much difference the answer would make, at least as it related to her present situation. "I want to know what I was meant to be," she said at length.

"While I *think* I know what you're asking," Eve said carefully, "I will need to ask you to be more specific than that, please."

"Indeed," Chikaru laughed, though there was little humor in it. "My sexuality, or rather my lack thereof, is becoming a right nuisance." She shook her head. "No, that's understating it terribly. It weighs on me every day that I might never be able to experience that with these women I love so dearly. Intellectually, I know I *want* to share my body with them, but… my body isn't cooperating with my intellect."

"Go on," Eve said softly.

Chikaru hung her head over the railing, and for a moment watched her long braids swaying against the infinite backdrop. "I've been trying to remember where I was before the *Souma* came to me, and I'm having difficulty doing so. On the one hand, I think I remember that I might have been edging toward heterosexuality, but on the other, I don't know how many of those thoughts were due to genuine feelings, and how many were there because it was *expected* of me to start turning my sights toward boys, so I could grow up to be the good little wife that society wants me to be."

She then looked over at the goddess beside her. "Then I think of the crush I had on you, and I think of the way it made me happy to see Shizuma and Kaori together, and I wonder if those were the first faint

stirrings of my inner lesbian, or if they were merely sisterly adoration and the joy of seeing two friends sharing their love and happiness."

Eve nodded slowly. "What are you asking, little sister?"

The Lulim president let out a short, heavy sigh. "I know it wasn't the *Souma* that changed me, *per se*, but I can't help thinking that things would have turned out differently without it. Is there any way you could tell me how I would have ended up if I'd never inherited this power?"

"Not definitively," Eve replied shaking her head. "Such a question would be better posed to Lilith than myself: predicting an outcome from existing patterns is within her circle of influence, not mine. Even then, it would only be a prediction based on who you were in the years leading up to my departure."

Chikaru nodded slowly. "So there would still be room for doubt."

"Some, yes."

"You know, now that you say it that way… that really flies in the face of the idea that sexuality is hard-wired into us from birth, doesn't it?"

Eve made a face. "There's a difference between genetic predisposition and drawing a conclusion based on the patterns of behavior shown in pre- and early adolescence."

"That sounded… very *scientific* coming from a goddess," Chikaru said, giving Eve a sidelong grin. "So which is it, if I'm allowed to know? Is sexuality part of our genetic makeup, or is it influenced by environment?"

"Yes," Eve said simply. She paused a moment to let Chikaru chew on that answer, then went on. "The answers to these questions aren't as easy as one idea or another, little sister. You know that. What you are born capable of, and what you eventually experience in your lives… you spend so much time trying to pin those down

instead of simply accepting them for what they are, and it's a shame."

"Mortal curiosity can be a pain," Chikaru agreed.

"I'm curious as well, Chi-chan: why do you want to know this so badly? Do you really think it would change anything between you, Hazuki-chan and Tamao-chan?"

"Probably not," Chikaru admitted. "I was actually thinking the same thing before I asked you."

"If you think it would help," Eve offered, "I can tell you what *I* think about the young woman you were becoming. Not as a goddess granting you as a favor, mind you, but as a sister reminiscing about our past together. Would you like that?"

"Mmm, I think I might, at that," Chikaru smiled. "So what did you see through the all-knowing eyes of the onee-chan?"

Those very eyes grew distant, and Chikaru wondered what it was like for her to reach across so many lifetimes for the memories she was seeking. At last, the younger Keeper frowned thoughtfully. "You always had an appreciation for art," she said. "You had a way of finding beauty in everything around you, and putting it in your sketchbooks." The frown gradually faded into a smile. "When you were ten years old, you were stealing our father's ecchi magazines and studying them, and then filling your pages with breathtaking images of these beautiful women. It didn't stop there, though: in the same week you'd stay up all night watching martial arts movies, and then draw the most lifelike men in all their dramatic glory."

"I suppose I was equal opportunity back then," Chikaru smiled wanly, looking down into the atrium again.

"You were learning the art and beauty of the human form," Eve went on. "You would see a handsome man, your eyes would light up, and our parents would say 'Oh, isn't Chi-chan cute with her little crush.'

You would see a beautiful woman, you'd stare at her in awe, and our parents would say 'Oh, isn't Chi-chan cute with the way she looks up to others.' They had no idea that every one of those people would end up in your sketchbook. You were collecting beauty, and to your credit, you found it in a great many people, not merely the tall and handsome man, or the dainty and proper lady."

Chikaru said nothing, as she already knew what was coming next.

"And then," Eve said carefully, "there was that summer day before your first year at St. Lulim, when I offered to be the subject for one of your sketches."

"If you want to call coming into my room while I was drawing, taking off most of your clothes and then striking a pose on my bed an *offer*, yes."

"It was a very *tasteful* pose. I was in *seiza*, if memory serves, with my hands tucked in my lap. And I was still wearing panties."

"And nothing else, yes."

"Did it bother you then, Chi-chan?" Eve asked, sounding surprised. "I was certain it didn't."

"No, of course it didn't bother me *then*," Chikaru sighed. "I was happy for the chance, to be honest. I'd sketched you, but I'd always wanted to draw your portrait." She considered her next words carefully. "I was… fascinated by the way your body had been changing, and I wanted to put that on paper, to better understand it."

"Exactly," Eve nodded. "It was innocent, and it was art. Even with all your so-called crush and admiration, your thoughts were pure. What happened next was a misunderstanding, and nothing more."

"Well, in retrospect, I can understand why our father was a bit bothered when he walked in on his eleven-year-old daughter drawing a semi-nude portrait of his thirteen-year-old daughter, yes."

"Perhaps, but you certainly didn't understand it *then*, Chi-chan," Eve said then. "There was nothing happening in that room but an innocent appreciation of perceived beauty, but for those who cannot differentiate beauty and sex, it looked completely different. I'm sure you remember what happened next. No more baths together, no more sneaking into one another's beds to sleep, no more cuddling on the couch while watching television…"

"They took you away from me," Chikaru whispered.

"For a time, yes," Eve agreed. "But once we were together again at school, even with our mother being in close proximity, we were free to be sisters once more. By then though… you had learned a few unkind lessons. Even though I'm sure our parents were simply overreacting because of a wrongly perceived breaking of an incest taboo, their actions taught an innocent girl that beauty was inextricably tied to shameful, dirty things. Things which I believe, deep down, you're still afraid of, even if you now know, *intellectually*, that they need neither be shameful nor dirty."

Chikaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. In all her self-examinations, she'd never thought of it in quite this way. "So… again, we come to the idea that I somehow *made* myself asexual."

"Or possibly, you simply affirmed something that was already there," Eve said gently. "Speaking only from my experiences living with human beings, the depth of your innocence at that age was something astonishing. Knowing you now as I do, and remembering the you that was, I'm not certain when, if ever, you would have truly experienced a sexual awakening, even without the actions of our parents potentially suppressing one."

"So… I was *meant* to be this way?" Chikaru said in a desolate voice, feeling a tightening in her throat.

"Or… perhaps your awakening is still to come," Eve offered.

Chikaru sighed noisily and looked back down into the blackness. "It's enough to make me want to ask for *that* as a boon."

There was a long pause, and when Eve next spoke, her words were slow and deliberate. "I… *could* do that for you, you know."

"What?" Chikaru asked, turning back to the goddess who had been her sister.

"I could grant you that boon, if you wished," Eve told her. "I could awaken that desire in your mind and heart, and focus it on the two that you already love so deeply. I could make you want to be their lover with more than just your intellect."

Her face was almost guardedly neutral as she said this, and Chikaru could not tell whether Eve truly *wanted* to say these words, or was somehow *bound* to. "I could never accept that, though, tempting as the idea might be," Chikaru smiled wryly. "How could I enjoy making love with them if I knew in my heart that I had to be somehow forced into feeling that way in spite of myself?"

"It would not have to be like *that* at all," Eve said in the same measured voice. "I could erase your memories of this conversation, so that you'd never know you asked for this: we could give you the memory of another, smaller boon that you requested because of your reluctance to ask too much of me. Then, I could arrange that it be a gradual awakening, so that it would feel like a natural progression of your own emotions, rather than the result of any divine intervention. You would never have to know that I had a hand in it, and you could move on with the life you so desire with your two loves."

Chikaru could only stare at her, dumbstruck. Could it really be this simple?

"So I ask again, little sister," Eve whispered. "Is this the boon you would ask of me?"

"Just name it," Lilith grinned at Kaname, spreading her arms wide, "and if it's within our power, it's yours. The only catch is that it has to be something for *you* ." Her grin deepened. "And it can't be wild sex with the Maker, because I'd do that anyhow."

Kaname snorted. "How did I know this would get back to sex at some point?"

"Are you saying I'm predictable, Kaname-chan?" Lilith pouted, batting her lashes at the taller girl.

"Well, you led me up to the very same set of shelves where we…" Kaname began.

"Huh, so I did," Lilith interrupted her, looking around the area with what seemed to be genuine surprise. "Force of habit, I suppose. But as long as we're here, we could make it two for two?"

"Trying to be monogamous here, Lilith," Kaname smiled thinly.

Lilith gave a dramatic sigh. "Yes, I know, with that cow Momomi. Hmm, cow… I suppose I could start calling her Moo-moo-mi."

"What's your problem with Momomi, anyway?" Kaname frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You mean my beef?"

Kaname ran a hand through her hair. "Enough with the cow metaphor, please?"

To Kaname's surprise, Lilith's pout faded into a hard, serious expression. "I don't have a *problem* with Momomi. Not like you're thinking, anyway."

"You could have fooled me, the way you keep talking sh*t about her like you do."

Lilith gave her another hard look, then made a business of straightening some of the nearby books on their shelf. "It's true, though. As a goddess, I have no problem at all with Momomi. It wouldn't be my place to hold a grudge against a mortal, particularly one who has not knowingly wronged me in any way." She paused, then looked back at Kaname with narrowed eyes. "However, as someone who very recently lived a mortal life in a world much like your own, let's just say I have some very bad memories of *another* Momomi."

Unbidden, the image of a terrified Momomi clinging to her armor passed before Kaname's mind's eye. "You… didn't get along with her, then?"

"No, I'm afraid not. My dear senpai decided very early on that she didn't like me. To this day I still don't have a clue as to why, and I will not sully myself now by going back to that book and looking up the answer. I was content to leave her be and enjoy my happy little yuri paradise with my roommate, but…" The look in Lilith's eyes was now almost dangerous. "She wouldn't allow that."

"What did she do to you?" Kaname asked, baffled at the thought of Momomi picking a fight with a goddess, even without knowledge of what she really was.

"Oh, she didn't do anything to *me*, Kaname-chan," Lilith smiled thinly. "That would have been too overt for someone like her. No, she went after my Tamao-chan."

Kaname rocked back on her mental heels at this reminder of the alternate Tamao's involvement with Lilith. The sheer cognitive disconnect of picturing the two of them together was still a bit much for her. "What did she do?" she asked again.

"The usual. Rumor and innuendo. Insinuation and sheer lies. It wasn't long before Tamao-chan was known throughout Strawberry Hall as the girl who was f*cking the Étoile's sister for her own political gain. It was quite disturbing how many were willing to believe that,

too. Kaori-chan did her best to limit the damage, but there was only so much she could do, even as Étoile." Here, Lilith once more met Kaname's eyes. "So you'll forgive me, surely, if I have less than charitable thoughts about the name Kiyashiki Momomi. But no, I don't have a *problem* with your girlfriend."

"You're not jealous of her?" Kaname asked before she could think better of it.

To Kaname's surprise, Lilith sighed heavily. "No, I'm not jealous of her. This may come as a shock, Kaname-chan, but I really *do* want you to have a long, happy, fulfilling relationship with her. Maybe you'll even be a good influence on her, who knows? You may not be fully mortal now, but you deserve to have that sort of attachment at least once in your life. We could have a lot of fun together, and I still hope that we will at some point, but… we can't be forever, you and I. That's just… not the way it works."

"We can't?" Kaname asked, feeling a very real clench of dismay in her chest.

Lilith shook her head. "Kaname-chan, if it were possible for a Keeper and a mortal to fall in love and be together for the long haul, Hazuki-chan would be living in this Library with us right now, and none of the rest of this would ever have happened."

After a short silence, Lilith took a breath and made an effort to get her happy face back. "So, until such time as you and I can get back to the aforementioned fun, there's still the matter of your boon. What can we do for you?"

Kaname thought about this. In all honesty, she was pretty pleased with how things were going. Sure, her father was trying to set her up in a marriage with Hoshi, who was probably on the lam even now, and sure, Momomi was alternating between clingy and distant in an almost bipolar fashion, and sure, she had this anger management problem that might have led to a broken neck recently, but… in all fairness, she was okay with those, and was determined to work them

out on her own. Maybe now was the time to ask for that dragon-skin jacket.

However, the mention of Kaori, and that of Lilith holding a grudge, had returned her to an uncomfortable train of thought, and she realized that if she was ever going to find peace with this goddess who had an eye for her, this needed to come out into the open. "How about this, then? Can you do me the favor of forgiving Kaori?"

"Absolutely not," Lilith frowned.

"Why not?"

Lilith crossed her arms, and her expression began to venture into annoyed. "Because first of all, your boon is for *you:* there are *laws* we need to follow here. Second of all… well, there doesn't even need to be a second of all, does there?"

"So even if I said it would make *me* feel a lot better to know that you made nice with Kaori and found her a world to live in, that wouldn't be good enough to call it a favor?"

"Why are we even talking about this?" Lilith scowled. "What's going on between me and Kaori is *our* business. It has *nothing* to do with you."

Kaname had to disagree: it had *everything* to do with her. As long as Kaori was being left hanging, she knew that she'd never be truly comfortable around Lilith.

And so, Kaname decided to stop thinking and start acting. She reached over to the nearest shelf, took down a book at random, and opened it to about the halfway mark, while Lilith watched with no small amount of confusion on her pretty face. Giving Lilith a hard look of her own, then, Kaname held the book up, one hand gripping each opened half. "What do you say I make it have something to do with me, then? Forgive Kaori, or I tear this book in half, right down the spine."

Lilith's eyes literally turned black, and her face was suddenly full of steel and menace. "Don't even joke about this, Kaname."

"I'm not joking. I'm threatening. She was your mortal sister who tried to take care of you and your girlfriend, and in the end she made a mistake out of love and desperation. Come down off your pedestal for a second and remember what it was like to be in love, *goddess* . Forgive her, or I start tearing."

"You have no idea who you're f*cking with," Lilith said in a low voice, and for just the briefest instant, Kaname realized what a pants-wettingly bad idea this was. "You. Are playing. With *fire* . Do you have any *concept* of what I could do to you? You *know* what happens to anyone who threatens my books."

"Yeah, either a trip to your lower tract or a total erasure of my life. Fine. Get on with it, then." She tightened her hands on the book and began to pull just slightly.

The air around Lilith began to glow with a halo of *Souma,* partially eclipsed by waves of what looked like seething black smoke emanating from the goddess herself. "Put… the book… *down!* " she said, her tone bereft of mercy, or indeed humanity.

" *Go ahead and do it!* Kill me, eat me, erase me, *whatever!* I'm only going to piss you off one of these days anyway, right? Come on, let's get this over with!"

After several seconds in which no divine thunderbolt came, Kaname narrowed her eyes at Lilith. "But you can't do it, can you? There are probably laws for that, too, aren't there? Maybe you can't raise a hand against a mortal when you're in her debt? My, my, did I just find a loophole?"

Lilith gave Kaname a predatory smile. "Tear the book and find out."

"If you say so," Kaname nodded, and resumed pulling.

" ***STOP!*** " Lilith shrieked. " *Fine! I forgive her! We'll find a world for her! Just put the book down!"*

"Your word," Kaname grated.

"You have my word as Keeper of the Great Library! I forgive her! Now stop this insanity and put the book *down!* "

Kaname nodded slowly, then closed the book and set it back on its shelf. Wasting no time, she then knelt, placed her hands palm-down on the stone tiles, and bowed until her forehead touched the backs of her hands. "Now, then. As for my boon, I ask that you forgive *me* for my transgression against you and your creation, Lilith-sama. You have *my* word that I'll never threaten your works again."

She remained in that position for what felt like a small eternity before Lilith spoke. "Get up."

With the adrenaline beginning to wear off, Kaname found her legs to be a little unsteady, but she managed to rise and face Lilith. The Keeper's aura had faded, but her face was still thunderous as she stared Kaname down.

"Now… I've *been* down there, so I know this isn't *literally* true," Lilith said in a low growl, "but you have got some big, swinging brass *balls,* chica."

"All things considered, I'll take that as a compliment," Kaname nodded.

There was a brief flicker of what almost looked like humor. "Your boon is granted. Bitch."

Kaname exhaled, then gave her a low bow. "Thank you, Lilith-sama."

"Yeah, f*ck you."

"Love you too."

"I am *so* f*cking hot for you right now."

"And I'm still trying to be monogamous."

"Bitch."

"Ren-chan, please…"

Eve reached for Ryofu's arm, hoping to stop her, but it was too late: the warrior had already backed away and retreated down the long passage. For a long while Eve's hand hovered there, mid-gesture, but then she hung her head and dropped the hand to her side.

"No luck?" came Lilith's voice, as her fellow Keeper suddenly appeared beside her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"She… still won't let me touch her," Eve sighed.

Lilith nodded slowly, then kissed Eve's hair. "I'll talk to her," she said softly, then followed Ryofu into the darkness.

Eve watched them go for a moment, then realized that she was still not alone. "Hello again, Hazuki-chan," she said with a faint smile.

She heard soft footfalls approaching, followed by Hazuki's voice. "What happened, Hatsumi?"

"Ryofu-chan… feels unworthy of me," Eve said with some difficulty. "She feels that she failed me when we were children, and even now, she can barely meet my eyes, and won't let me touch her." She looked up at Hazuki, remembering vividly her once-sister's words of reproach after having rescued her from the Devourer. "Another mess I left behind, and one that I'm still not certain I can make up for."

"She's traumatized," Hazuki reminded her. "Not that I can blame her, with all she's been through. Maybe… maybe I can talk to her: try to

get through to her somehow. I owe her at least that much, after everything she did for me."

Eve nodded in agreement. "You know… I was concerned that I'd traumatized you as well, after our last chat."

At this, Hazuki actually managed a smile. "It was certainly a shock, yes, but… now that I've had time to think about it, I feel a little better about it all."

"Do you… approve of my actions?"

"Honestly, they were far better than anything *I* could have come up with," Hazuki shrugged. "I think you did what was best, given the circumstances. I'm glad to know our parents are more or less at peace, and… and that *she* is as well."

Eve shared Hazuki's smile for a moment, then held out her hand. Hazuki took it in her own, and they resumed their interrupted stroll from earlier. "Have you given any additional thought to your boon?" Eve ventured.

"Not really," Hazuki admitted. "Unless… maybe you could do something about finding Kaori a new world?"

"You're not the first to ask for that," Eve chuckled. "Don't worry about her, Hazuki-chan; steps will be taken soon. Besides, your boon must be something of benefit to yourself, not others."

"I'm not sure I really need anything right now," Hazuki said, gesturing vaguely with her free hand. "All things considered, I've got a pretty good life going, back on Astraea Hill. Tell you what: why don't you pick out something for me?"

Eve stopped in her tracks, and turned to look up at the taller girl. "You would… trust me with that?"

"I've always trusted you, Hatsumi," Hazuki smiled, reaching to hesitantly brush a lock of hair back from Eve's brow. "You've always known me better than I know myself."

"That's not true," Eve whispered, feeling a faint shiver at the brief touch of Hazuki's hand on her face.

"Tell me what you think, then," Hazuki insisted. "Surprise me. Knowing me as you do, what do you think you could do to make me happy right now?"

Immortal or not, Eve's heart thudded against her ribs at these words. Was it still happening after all? "Walk with me a little more," she whispered, trying to keep her voice from cracking.

She led Hazuki past endless worlds in silence for a while, then cleared her throat to speak. "When you asked about our parents, you said you still had regrets about the past. You said that even though you were happy in your new life, with the ones you love… you still held nagging regrets in your heart."

"Everyone has regrets," Hazuki said softly.

"Perhaps, but… it made me sad to think that my dear Hazuki-chan's happiness was tainted by such feelings." They stopped before a blank section of stone wall, clear of any shelves, and Eve turned to face Hazuki, taking her other hand as well. "Perhaps I can help with that."

"What did you have in mind?" Hazuki asked, setting her head to one side.

"Perhaps I could help you find closure… for a *different* regret."

Eve reached back toward the wall, and a simple wooden door appeared. She turned the handle and pushed it open, leading Hazuki inside.

While Lilith was the Maker among them, Eve still had considerable power to shape the world that was her own home, and as they stepped into the space beyond, it formed into the image of a familiar bedroom in the house where she and Hazuki had grown up together. A small digital clock showed the time to be nearly midnight, and the glow of a streetlight through the curtains traced the room in comfortable shadow.

Hazuki's hand slipped from hers, and Eve heard her gasp. "Hatsumi..?" she whispered. "Why… why did you bring us here?"

"To face your regret, Hazuki-chan," Eve said softly. She seated herself on the bed, and with a swirl of green energy, she was once again dressed in the silk nightie she'd been wearing those two final nights: the night she had first disappeared from Hazuki's life, and the night she had returned to share a single kiss. She looked up to meet Hazuki's wide, unblinking eyes, then held out her hand, as she had done on the second of those nights. Hazuki took it, as she had then, and sat down beside her on the mattress.

"I don't…" Hazuki began, but then shook her head, unable to finish a thought. "Why are we… what are..?"

"I abandoned you," Eve said in a hushed voice. "Not just here, on the night I turned sixteen, but again in the Universal Garden. I left you alone and desolate, and… I *had* to come back to you. Lilith allowed me one last night at your side, so I brought us back to this moment… to let you live out the dream you'd so long desired."

Hazuki said nothing: only continued to stare. "It was a blessing to be able to share that night with you," Eve went on, "but you were exhausted and broken by the trials I'd unknowingly put you through, and… after one kiss, you collapsed against me, and I held you through the night as you finally rested at the end of your long journey."

"I remember," Hazuki quavered.

"And then… I had to abandon you again, still unfulfilled. Still not having lived the dream that had been in your heart for so long." Eve took a deep breath, then released Hazuki's hand, and reached for the thin straps of her nightgown. She slipped them over her shoulders, and the gauzy material slid effortlessly over her skin, the entire garment falling to her hips.

"Touch me, Hazuki-chan," Eve whispered, taking Hazuki's trembling hand and laying it over her breast. "Make love with me. Fulfill your dream, and then return to your loved ones with a heart free of regret."

For a few perfect seconds, the feel of Hazuki's hand on her skin was bliss itself, but then, to Eve's disquiet, tears began to fill those vivid blue eyes, and Hazuki began slowly shaking her head. "Are you…" Hazuki said in a strangled voice. "Are you saying..?"

"What it is, my love?"

Hazuki pulled her hand away and lurched to her feet, her face slowly twisting into a look of horror. She shook her head so hard that tears flew to either side of her, shining in the soft glow from outside. "Are you saying that *this* is what I want?" she sobbed. "Is *this* who I really am?"

"Hazuki-chan," Eve whispered, rising to her feet and reaching for the girl who had once followed her across innumerable worlds. Suddenly everything was falling apart, and all she knew was that she was hurting her Hazuki-chan and had to make it right somehow.

Before Eve could touch her, though, Hazuki backed blindly away, slamming one hip into Hatsumi's desk as she fled. "But you *told* me!" Hazuki trembled, her voice near hysterics. "When I hugged you, you *told* me that you knew when hearts were true! You… you said I hadn't done anything wrong! Was this what you *really* saw? Is this the kind of person I *really* am?"

To her own horror, Eve realized that Hazuki was not upset with her for having instigated this: she truly believed that this was what Eve had seen in her heart. She still trusted her Hatsumi enough to believe that this was the truth, and it was a truth that had shattered her soul.

With a cruel, frigid clarity, Eve realized what she had done, and whose regrets she had truly attempted to assuage.

Hazuki by this time had backed herself into the corner of the room, then slowly collapsed against the wall, hugging her knees to her chest. Eve quickly re-assumed her Keeper garb and knelt beside her, reaching gingerly to stroke the shaking girl's dark hair. "Hazuki-chan, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Don't let me be that person, Hatsumi, *please*," Hazuki begged in a tremulous wail. "Don't let me be someone who would hurt them. Please, Hatsumi, please… if that's who I really am, then take that part *out* of me. Let *that* be my boon. I can't be someone who would hurt them, *I can't!* "

"Hazuki-chan, stop," Eve whispered, holding one hand to the other girl's temple.

Just like that, Hazuki did so, her entire body relaxing at Eve's healing touch. Her breathing returned to normal, and her eyes drifted closed. Slowly and carefully, Eve guided her to her feet, then led her out through the door and back amongst the bookshelves, pausing only a moment to vanish the door behind her.

"Forgive me, Hazuki-chan," she whispered. Then, with an ease that shamed her, Eve reached into Hazuki's mind and gently wiped away the memories of these last moments. "I cannot grant that boon, dear sister, because the fault was not yours. I'm sorry to have hurt you so carelessly… yet again." She reached to wipe the last of Hazuki's tears, then took a deep breath. "I'm the one who would hurt the ones I love over my own regrets, not you."

Hazuki said nothing, as she was still entranced. Eve studied that beautiful face for a long moment, wondering what could have been. Another regret that she would have to carry, but no less than she deserved.

"Wake," she whispered.

"What did you have in mind?" Hazuki asked, opening her eyes and setting her head to one side, just as she had done minutes before.

Eve forced a faint, thoughtful smile. "Perhaps I could help you find closure… for a *different* regret."

Hazuki twitched her head for a moment, as though trying to shake a fly from the end of her nose. "Huh. I just felt the strangest sense of déjà vu."

"Strange," Eve agreed.

"Well… again, what did you have in mind?" Hazuki asked curiously.

Eve took a deep breath and tried once more to listen to Hazuki's heart, hoping that it was not too late to clean up this latest mess. "Come with me, Hazuki-chan," Eve smiled with all the warmth she could manage, "and I'll show you."

When the world finally stabilized around her, Hazuki found herself no longer in a burned-out ruin, but a raging battle, with the village in flames around her. Foot soldiers and cavalry locked sword and spear in a brutal struggle, and the ground was littered with the dead and the wounded.

Before she could even draw her sword, Hazuki found herself under attack: a soldier on horseback had noticed her appearance and charged for her, his spear pointed at her throat. With one quick motion, Hazuki drove the advancing spear into the ground, causing its wielder to be unseated from his mount. Hazuki grabbed the reins

of the rearing horse, then swung herself into the saddle, aiming a kick at the head of the soldier as he tried to get to his feet. She drew her sword, jammed the empty scabbard beneath the saddle, and urged the horse forward.

It had been a long time since Hazuki had ridden a horse, never mind how long it had been since she had been in the middle of anything quite like this, but the memories of what to do were already flooding back. She guided her liberated steed through the flames and over the bodies of the fallen, scanning the carnage for anything familiar while fending off several attacks with sweeping arcs from her katana.

She heard the unmistakable voice well before she saw the telltale flashes of white, gold, and pale blue, and even with all this death around her, Hazuki could not hold back a grin of something very much like joy.

" *Cowards! Mongrels! Oppressors of the weak! Face me if you dare! I, Chou Shiryuu, will be your opponent!"*

Next: Closure

AUTHOR'S CLOSING NOTE: And now a small beg from your author. After ten years, Media Blasters has licensed Yami to Bōshi to Hon no Tabibito for a North American release, with a street date of October 22, 2013, under the title *Yamibo: Darkness, the Hat and the Travelers of the Books* . One of the hardest self-justifications I've had to make while writing Yamiberry is the fact that I've been tacitly encouraging readers to watch something that was not commercially (read: legally) available in most of the world, unless you're hardcore like me and imported the Japanese releases. Media Blasters has been having a rough go of late, but I'm very grateful that they took this chance on a ten-year-old show, so I would appreciate it hugely if you would consider giving this a look when and if it hits shelves. Thank you. I'll stop now.

And oh yeah, Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook. Cheers!

Closure

Blood runs thick, and when it rains it pours down

On the family tree or the fields of war

If I spend my time being broken-hearted and grieving-bound

I haven't much need to look forward

-Indigo Girls

Part 16: Closure

When Eve had first suggested to Hazuki that she could use her boon for a chance to see Chou'un again, it had seemed too much to hope for: after all, the goddess had already been quite clear about not being able to bring her back to life. This, as it turned out, was still quite true, but then Eve reminded Hazuki of the concept of traveling to the past within an existing book: something Hazuki herself had once done while she and Lilith had been searching for Eve.

Now, a short while later, Hazuki was nervously leaning against the railing around the central atrium, waiting for a confirmation from Lilith that this would even be possible. The elder goddess had Ryofu's home book sitting on a table, and was studiously paging backward through the tome and occasionally frowning. After a while, she called Eve over to show her something, and the two goddesses started whispering intently to one another, alternating glances between the book, one another, and Hazuki herself. The expression on Lilith's face was a bit unnerving, to be honest: she was looking at Hazuki in an almost accusing fashion, and for the life of her, Hazuki could not figure out what she might have done to upset Lilith so.

At length, after tracing over the text with her finger for a moment, Lilith nodded almost grudgingly and called Ryofu over as well to join the discussion (that is to say, Ryofu mostly nodded, shook her head or gave the briefest of answers as Lilith and Eve asked questions). Hazuki could not help noticing here that Ryofu was indeed avoiding eye contact with Eve, much to the younger goddess's obvious dismay.

"Hazuki-chan?" came a voice from beside her, and Hazuki looked over, somewhat startled to see Tamao standing there.

"Tamao-chan," she smiled in reply. "Sorry, I was a million miles away."

"Chikaru told me about your boon," Tamao smiled hesitantly, looking over to where the third of their circle was watching the proceedings with Kaname, chatting softly with the taller woman. "I think it's… wonderful that you could have this chance."

Hazuki studied Tamao's face for a moment, as her words were more than slightly at odds with her expression. "You don't look… *happy* for me," Hazuki ventured. "Do you think this is too selfish a thing to ask?

"Oh, not at all," Tamao denied, shaking her head. "Aside from which, they made it very clear that we were supposed to be *a little* selfish with these."

"Then what's bothering you?" Hazuki asked gently. "Eve already said she and Lilith would guarantee my safety, if that's it."

"That's… partially it," Tamao said carefully. She then made several obvious attempts to find the next words before actually saying them. "Hazuki-chan," she said evenly, "I just wanted you to know something before you go."

"What is it, love?"

Tamao took another breath before getting the rest out. "I know how… important Chou'un was to you. *Is* to you. I just want you to know that… if you have any… unfinished business with her..? You have my blessing. It can stay within the book, and I never have to know about it."

Hazuki stared at the younger girl for a moment, completely baffled, and then so much as felt her heart turn to ice. All the guilt of that embrace with Hatsumi, and the rush of emotions that came with it, came roaring back to life, along with something else: something hovering just at the edges of her consciousness where she could not grasp it. There was an empty space there, almost as though she had forgotten another secret shame, and Hazuki felt the sudden threat of tears. "Is… that what you think I'm doing this for, Tamao-chan?" she said in a tiny, constricted voice. "Is that who you think I am?" Even as she said these words, there was a horrible familiarity to them, as though she'd been through this before, but again, she could not place it.

"I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan," Tamao said, her face flushing.

"Tamao-chan, I… I hugged my first love and… and remembered how it used to make me feel," Hazuki said desperately. "For heaven's sake, does that make you see me as someone who's… looking for a chance to *cheat* on you? If it worries you this much, I won't go. I'll choose something else."

"Hazuki, *no!* " Tamao cried, suddenly throwing her arms around the taller girl. "I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that at all. I just…"

Hazuki held her in return. "I don't want that from her," she whispered. "I don't want anyone but you and Chikaru. Or… is that part of it? Are you worried that once someone falls in love with two people, it won't stop there?"

"No, no, it's not that," Tamao sighed, shaking her head against Hazuki, her voice somewhat muffled from the tightness of the

embrace. "I'd be a hypocrite to think that, with how much I love you both. I think I'm just… jealous." She looked up at Hazuki with tears in her eyes, but this time she was smiling almost sheepishly. "Even before we… *became* what we are, I was never jealous of how close you and Chikaru were, and now here I am being jealous of a d… of a woman from another world whom I've never met. I think I was just trying to… be *strong*, and let you…" She sighed noisily, again burying her face in Hazuki's chest. "Or maybe I don't know *what* I was thinking. But please, Hazuki-chan, go see her. You *need* this."

"You're sure?" Hazuki whispered, nuzzling her hair.

"I'm sure," Tamao nodded. "Forgive me, Hazuki-chan. That was thoughtless of me."

"If I can interrupt the foreplay for a second?" Lilith suddenly called. "Hazuki-chan, we're ready for you."

Hazuki slowly broke from the embrace with Tamao, and then the two of them, still holding hands, approached the table. From nearby, Chikaru and Kaname joined them as well, and Chikaru took Hazuki's other hand, giving her a somewhat distant smile.

"So here's how this is going to work," Lilith went on in a voice that was all business. "Hazuki-chan, we'll be dropping you in this world's present, then paging you back in time. You'll be appearing in the middle of what became known as the Battle of Changban." She then turned to Ryofu and nodded.

"Things had been peaceful," Ryofu said quietly, "but Sousou Moutoku still had designs on ruling a unified land, so she led her armies against Ryuubi Gentoku's forces. This battle was a defeat for Ryuubi, but she and her generals survived to fight again at Red Cliffs."

Hazuki nodded slowly. This had been depicted as a pivotal moment in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, not to mention its many adaptations to film and game. "If it's a battle of that much

importance, though," she asked, "should I even be there? If I end up taking part in the battle, couldn't that screw up history that's already written?"

"You let me worry about that part," Lilith waved, still looking a bit annoyed by all of this. "I'll make sure it all fits together in the end."

"Why put her into a battle, though?" Tamao asked. "Can't you just let her appear in a time of peace?" Hazuki squeezed the younger girl's hand in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

Lilith made a sour face, then smiled wryly at Tamao. "Because this is the way it needs to be," she said simply. "After a few lessons, I may be able to explain it better, but there's a reason it has to be this moment. Just trust me for now, okay?"

"All right," Tamao nodded, though she still looked more than a little concerned. Chikaru let go of Hazuki's hand, then, and came across to put her arm around Tamao's waist.

"I'll be careful, Tamao-chan," Hazuki smiled.

"Want another sword to come with you?" Kaname offered.

"Shut it, you," Lilith snapped, glaring at Kaname. "Your debt's already paid up."

"Just asking," Kaname shrugged, holding up both hands.

Hazuki wasn't sure what all that had been about, but she gave Kaname a nod of thanks all the same. "Ryofu?" she then asked carefully. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Lilith says I can't," Ryofu said, shaking her head.

"Were you already at this battle?"

Ryofu looked down at the book. "No. I had chosen no side at this time." She then looked over at Lilith.

"Her *Souma* presence can't exist in two places at the same time in the same book," Lilith elaborated. "Or at least, it shouldn't: it might be dangerous if we tried. You'll be flying solo for this, Hazuki-chan, but don't worry. You'll be perfectly safe." She gave a somewhat sardonic smile at this, then waved everyone off. "Okay, everyone else clear out. I'll want some space for this."

"Good luck, Hazuki-chan," Tamao whispered, giving her another hug, followed by a gentle, somewhat lingering kiss.

"I'll be back soon," Hazuki assured her.

"I'm looking forward to the story," Chikaru said with an amused smile, stepping in to embrace Hazuki next. "Even though she doesn't know us, please give Chou'un our best. I'm very thankful to her for everything she did for you."

"I will," Hazuki nodded, leaning down to kiss Chikaru on the cheek.

Kaname was next, offering a warrior handshake and a quick back-slapping hug. "Don't kick too much ass without me."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Lastly, Ryofu took both of Hazuki's hands and gave them a squeeze, and Hazuki could feel the electricity of her *Souma* . It seemed like she was already figuring out how to share it on her own. "Remember: Sousou's armies will be holding blue standards, and Ryuubi's will be holding green. Chouhi's troops will be covering the retreat of the refugees, and Kan'u will be arriving to assist." She then looked lost in thought. "I know Chou'un was at the battle, but I don't remember what role she played."

"That's okay," Hazuki nodded. "I've got a pretty good idea of what she was doing, if it's anything like the accounts from our world." She squeezed the warrior's hands in return. "I'm sorry you can't come with me, Ren."

Ryofu shook her head. "There is… something else I want to ask Lilith for," she said quietly, "but I need to ask *you* about it first. Can we talk when you come back?"

"Of course."

"All done with the departing hero?" Lilith spoke up again. "The train to early third-century China is leaving the station. Hold onto your ass, Hazuki-chan: this might be a bumpy ride."

True to Lilith's warning, the transition was not the smoothest one ever, and upon her reappearance Hazuki found herself dizzy and rather nauseated. She found the remains of a wall nearby and steadied herself against it, then took a look around to get her bearings.

She was standing in the abandoned remains of a village which had obviously gotten the worst of the Three Kingdoms wars. The damage was old, though, with the blackened husks of buildings slowly being reclaimed by moss and the rubble-strewn streets overgrown with weeds. All was silence except the wind, though Hazuki fancied that the echoes of war were still there, just on the edge of hearing.

"There we are," came Lilith's voice, sounding faraway and tinny. "Now hold still, Hazuki-chan. I'm going to start turning the pages, and then it's all yours."

An aura of green enveloped her then, and the world began to blur. When she and Lilith had done this the first time, Hazuki had half-expected to see her surroundings as a time-lapse video in reverse, but instead, the scenery simply shimmered, coming in and out of focus as an ethereal wind whipped through Hazuki's hair. For a long while, the only sound was that of distant pages turning.

When the world finally stabilized around her, Hazuki found herself no longer in a burned-out ruin, but a raging battle, with the village in flames around her. Foot soldiers and cavalry locked sword and spear

in a brutal struggle, and the ground was littered with the dead and the wounded.

Before she could even draw her sword, Hazuki found herself under attack: a soldier on horseback had noticed her appearance and charged for her, his spear pointed at her throat. With one quick motion, Hazuki drove the advancing spear into the ground, causing its wielder to be unseated from his mount. Hazuki grabbed the reins of the rearing horse, then swung herself into the saddle, aiming a kick at the head of the soldier as he tried to get to his feet. She drew her sword, jammed the empty scabbard beneath the saddle, and urged the horse forward.

It had been a long time since Hazuki had ridden a horse, never mind how long it had been since she had been in the middle of anything quite like this, but the memories of what to do were already flooding back. She guided her liberated steed through the flames and over the bodies of the fallen, scanning the carnage for anything familiar while fending off several attacks with sweeping arcs from her katana.

She heard the unmistakable voice well before she saw the telltale flashes of white, gold, and pale blue, and even with all this death around her, Hazuki could not hold back a grin of something very much like joy.

" *Cowards! Mongrels! Oppressors of the weak! Face me if you dare! I, Chou Shiryuu, will be your opponent!"*

Getting any closer to that voice was proving to be quite a challenge, however, as Hazuki was finding herself under attack from both sides. The cavalry were almost entirely Sousou's forces, based on their banners and armor, whereas the ground troops were largely green-clad soldiers of Ryuubi, but both of them saw her as an unknown quantity. She did her best to simply dodge and parry the attacks as she guided her horse closer to the center of the action, and for now, that was enough.

At last, she found herself in what had perhaps been something of a town square, and there, mounted on a white horse and felling enemy soldiers left and right with her twin-pointed spear, was the menma-loving general herself. Chou'un looked the same as ever: impossibly brief white kimono with violet sash and trim, long billowing sleeves decorated with a pattern resembling golden wings, round white hat with dramatically flowing beaded tassels to either side, and the modified bob of pale blue hair with a single uncut lock whipping behind her. Even on horseback, her every move was a deadly dance of precision and grace.

She looked *glorious* .

As Hazuki continued trying to get closer, she saw someone on the ground holding up a small bundle to the general. While the few remaining footmen continued to buy her time, Chou'un planted her spear in the ground beside her, then took up the mass of cloth with both hands and started tying it over her chest like a sling. Hazuki felt her heart skip as she realized which piece of the Three Kingdoms legend she was now witnessing: Zhao Yun had ridden back into the thick of a losing battle to rescue the family of Liu Bei, including his infant son Liu Shan and his wife Lady Mi.

Only Lady Mi was anything but a lady in this case. In the true spirit of this world, where the many men of historical importance were instead women, the figure on the ground was decidedly male. Moreover, his clothing was as out-of-place in this setting as Hazuki's own: he looked rather like he was wearing at least parts of a Japanese school uniform.

"Get on my horse, *aruji!* " came Chou'un's voice over the clamor, as she pulled her spear back up and used it to disarm and then impale a charging blue-armored footman. "Quickly!"

"I can't do that!" the man shouted back. "I'll only slow you down! Get Ryuuzen back to Touka!"

" *Damn you, aruji, I'm not leaving you here! Stop speaking nonsense and get on my horse,* ***now!*** "

"I'm sorry, Sei-chan! I know how this part of the story ends! Give Touka my love..!"

Hazuki urged her horse into a charge. She knew how this part of the story ended as well: rather than slow down Zhao Yun, Lady Mi committed suicide by throwing herself into a well. Sure enough, there was a stone well at the man's back, and he was edging closer to it while Chou'un continued to hack down the charging enemies. After one last longing look at the bundle carried by Chou'un, he made a visible effort to gather his nerve, and leaped for the opening of the well.

" *Aruji!"* Chou'un screamed, reaching in vain for him as he jumped. Not even someone of her speed and skill could possibly close the gap in time to save him.

But Hazuki was already in full charge. Transferring her sword to her left hand, she swung herself down along the horse's right flank, grabbed the man by the collar of his uniform, and threw him over her mount's hindquarters. She somehow managed to swing herself back into the saddle in the same motion, and pulled the reins to bring her horse around to face Chou'un.

She then had the rare pleasure of seeing Chou'un's normally composed face break into a look of naked, wide-eyed shock, before lighting up with an unabashed smile of pure delight. "Hazuki!" she gasped, but then she furrowed her brow as she took in the sight of Hazuki's stolen horse. "Are you here as friend or foe?"

"What do *you* think, Sei?" Hazuki grinned in reply.

" *Seifuku..!"* the man behind her said in an amazed whisper as he scrambled to sit behind her. "And… a katana? Who *are* you?"

"The name's Azuma Hazuki," Hazuki said over her shoulder.

"You're- you're Japanese," he gaped. "And… wearing a *seifuku* ..? Did you fall through the time portal as well?"

"That will have to wait, *aruji*," Chou'un warned, as more of Sousou's soldiers closed in around them. "Hazuki, is your mount swift?"

"I guess we'll have to find out," Hazuki nodded. "I'm hoping you know the way out of here, Sei?"

"I guess we'll have to find out," Chou'un winked at her, and then she slapped her horse on the flank and let out a " *Kyai!"* Hazuki kicked her horse apologetically in the sides and gave a similar cry, urging the beast into a gallop. Soon, both of them were charging full-speed from the burning village, no fewer than a dozen mounted spearmen giving chase.

Chou'un's horse was quickness itself, much like its rider, but even burdened by a second full-grown passenger, Hazuki's was able to keep pace, at least for the time being. Hazuki chanced a look behind to see that the few remaining members of Ryuubi's army were doing their best to hinder the pursuing horsemen, buying time for their general to escape with the family of their leader. For just a moment, she found herself struck by the brutal reality of this war, where these brave men were trading their lives for something that might give hope to their remaining comrades even in defeat.

For a long time, the only sound was the thundering of hooves, and at last, after traveling an unknown distance through open country, Chou'un slowed her horse to a trot, then a walk, and finally a full stop. Hazuki slowed beside her, taking a brief look behind for any signs of pursuit. "Why are we stopping?" she asked.

Chou'un did not respond right away, and when Hazuki looked over at the other woman, her heart jumped. Chou'un was bent slightly forward, a pained expression on her face, and she appeared to be sweating profusely. "Sei, are you all right?" Hazuki gasped, looking for any signs of blood. "Are you hurt? Were you shot?"

"Nothing so imperiling as that, Hazuki-dono," Chou'un said through clenched teeth, making an effort to sit up straight in the saddle. She then shot a thin smile at the man seated behind Hazuki. " *Aruji*, you'll be pleased to know that your son takes after his father."

"I… what do you mean, Sei?" the man asked.

In response, Chou'un pulled the fabric of the sling to one side, to show that the baby she carried had managed to pull aside the fringe of her kimono and latch solidly onto her left breast, where he was happily suckling away. "I fear I have no milk to offer, but he seems to be taking comfort, at least," Chou'un said then, her voice slightly strained.

There was a momentary silence, and then the man seated behind Hazuki gave a single laugh. "Well, congratulations, son; you've gotten further with her than I ever could."

"What?" Hazuki yelped, shocked at the rudeness of the man's words.

"I suppose I should introduce you to the man whose life you saved," Chou'un went on. "Azuma-dono, this is the consort of Ryuubi Gentoku: the man commonly known as the Messenger of Heaven, who appeared to us in much the same way that you appeared to me."

"Hongo Kazuto," he added. "Please, call me Kazuto. May I call you Hazuki? Or… perhaps Hazuki-chan?"

There was something almost oily to his words, and Hazuki found that his tone set her teeth on edge. "A bit soon for that, don't you think, Hongo-dono?"

"Hey, as far as I'm concerned, an angel in *seifuku* who saved my life can call me whatever she wants."

Chou'un let out a snort. " *Aruji*, before you go any further, I should perhaps warn you that Azuma-dono is a member of *my* tribe."

"Oh," said Kazuto. "You're, um, a lesbian, then?"

"Yuri to the core," Hazuki nodded.

"You're not… experimenting?"

"No."

"Definitely not a type-S thing?"

"Aren't you married?" Hazuki scowled over her shoulder.

"You'll have to forgive him," Chou'un said dryly. " *Aruji* has proven himself to be very popular with the ladies in our retinue. Of course, I think it has less to do with his charm than the fact that his member is almost the size of my forearm."

"Yeah, I can feel it digging into the small of my back," Hazuki frowned. "Do you *mind?* "

"Hey, it's been years since I saw a beautiful girl in a *seifuku*," Kazuto said airily. "It's only natural. I see a cute girl and I can't help myself."

Hazuki turned in the saddle to look him in the eye. "Am I going to have to ride back there and drop you into that well myself?"

"Peace, Azuma-dono," Chou'un laughed, before her voice took on a bit of an edge. "I'm sure he'll behave himself. After all, he knows what will happen to that precious member if he continues to harass someone dear to me. Or have you already forgotten that incident with Bachou, *aruji?* "

Kazuto went pale. "That was a misunderstanding," he said quietly.

"Of course," Chou'un smiled. "It was a *misunderstanding* that the bath salts you gave to Bachou were laced with a powerful aphrodisiac, and it was a *misunderstanding* that you happened to stroll naked into her bath after they had taken effect and turned one of our finest generals into little more than a beast in heat. Just as I

assure you that it was a *misunderstanding* that led to your glorious manhood being pinned to the floor between the points of my spear before you could use it to take her maidenhead." Chou'un shrugged. "A simple comedy of errors, nothing more."

The pressure in the small of Hazuki's back eased somewhat.

Chou'un looked like she had more to say, but then she cocked her head to one side, as though listening for something. Soon, Hazuki heard it as well: the sound of many hoofbeats, growing louder by the second. "They're still following us?" Hazuki asked.

"Like their leader, Sou Moutoku's soldiers are nothing if not persistent," Chou'un nodded. She took a peek inside the bundle tied to her chest. "He seems to have fallen asleep, thank goodness. We'd better keep moving."

They resumed their southward run, but it became quickly apparent that with the initial sprint having ended, Hazuki's horse was starting to feel fatigued. It was a powerful creature, no doubt used to carrying a man in armor over great distances, but it was beginning to have difficulty keeping pace with Chou'un. The general eased her own mount slightly so that they would not be separated, but a quick look back revealed that the pursuing soldiers, while still distant, were beginning to slowly close the gap.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Hazuki shouted to the other woman.

"Ryuubi-dono's forces are making a stand to cover the retreat over the river!" Chou'un shouted back. "We'll be heading right into their battle with Sousou's vanguard! We'll need to slip past in the confusion and get back behind friendly lines!"

"If we make it that far!" Kazuto added. "I told you I'd only slow you down! You should leave me!"

"Don't tempt me!" Hazuki shot back at him. "Sei, you should ride ahead! Get the baby back to his mother! I'll look after this guy!"

Chou'un gave Hazuki an intent, almost dangerous look. "After all this time, I've only now found you again, Hazuki! I am *not* leaving you behind!"

"Rider ahead!" Kazuto shouted suddenly.

Hazuki looked forward to see that there was indeed another horse approaching. "Friend or foe?" Hazuki called to Chou'un.

"Friend," Chou'un replied, though by the expression on her face she was not at all happy about it.

The third rider turned her horse around and began riding in the same direction that they were, but slowly enough for them to catch up, so that within a minute, all three horses were galloping side by side. Hazuki saw here that the rider was a young woman whose long purple hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She looked about Hazuki's age - maybe a little older, maybe a little younger - and was both very pretty and (it could not help but be noticed) very busty: so much so that Hazuki felt the need to immediately educate the girl on the use of a *sarashi* if she intended to keep riding a horse like this.

"Sei-onee!" the girl called, looking relieved and amazed. " *Goshujin-sama!* You're safe!"

"Riri-chan, what are you *doing* out here?" Chou'un growled.

"Scouting ahead! How many are following you?"

"Too many!" Chou'un snapped. "Riri-chan, this is no place for a child!"

"I'm not a child anymore, Sei-onee!" Riri said in a firm voice, giving back a scowl of her own.

"Yeah, I'll say," Kazuto quietly agreed.

Not quietly enough that Hazuki did not hear him, however. "My God, do you ever *stop?* "

"Mother's army is laying in wait to ambush any reinforcements!" Riri went on. "Follow me! Our archers will get them off your back!"

Sousou Moutoku watched with great satisfaction as a line of her soldiers escorted the enemy general before her at spear-point. She had been waiting years for this moment, but all that time served only to make this victory that much sweeter.

Kakouton presented her commander with their opponent's weapon: an ornate *guandao* whose blade resembled a gout of flame breathed from the mouth of a green dragon. "The legendary Green Dragon Crescent Blade is yours, Karin-sama."

"Thank you, Shunran," Sousou smiled at her retainer, before turning her attention to a pair of brown eyes staring fire at her. "Of course, a weapon is merely a weapon. I am far more interested in possessing its wielder."

"I am not yours to possess, Sousou-dono," the black-haired woman scowled.

"Ah, Kan'u," Sousou chuckled, taking the other woman's polearm and giving it an experimental twirl. "Still resisting the inevitable. Still giving yourself to those unworthy of either your blade or your body. Join me, Kan'u, and you'll have your choice of my finest troops for the battlefield, and a preferred place in my bed. I've been waiting years to finish what I started that night in my tent, you know…" She heard Kakouton take a stiff breath at this promise, but ignored it.

"My blade is pledged to Ryuubi Gentoku," Kan'u said evenly, "even as my heart and body are pledged to another."

"Ah, yes, Shiryuu," Sousou sighed dramatically. "Your taste in lovers is as questionable as your choice of commander, but I can overlook that in this case." She again turned to bore her own gaze into Kan'u's. "You'll be trading up in both if you join me. After all, where *is*

Shiryuu, now that you need her? Where *is* the one who said she would always have your back?"

"No doubt fighting your men even as we speak," Kan'u smiled defiantly.

"No, I don't believe she is," Sousou said, her smile deepening. "Shuuran," she called over her shoulder. "Didn't your scouts tell you that they saw Shiryuu riding north, alone?"

Kakouen, standing opposite her sister at Sousou's flank, nodded crisply. "She was riding at full speed, with neither her personal guard nor any of her own soldiers."

"Curious," Sousou pondered. "While your forces retreated south, she instead broke ranks and delivered herself into the heart of my conquered territory. Perhaps she's smarter than I thought, and realized that the only way to save her life was to surrender to me. I could certainly find use for a woman of her talents, even if she did me the great disservice of defiling my prize." Smiling more deeply than ever, she again turned to face Kan'u. "Of course, I might be more willing to forgive her that transgression and allow her to live… if my prize were to come willingly…"

"Chou'un would never surrender to you," Kan'u growled, shaking her head slowly.

"Really, Kan'u? How can you be so sure?"

Several things happened at once. Even as a cry of " *Riders!"* came from nearby, a two-bladed polearm whose head resembled entwined serpents came whistling through the air and shattered the entire line of spears behind Kan'u, one shaft after another snapped between the twin points. Kan'u grabbed the severed ends of two of the sundered weapons and flung them at Kakouton and Kakouen, then gave a sweeping upward kick that knocked the Green Dragon Crescent Blade out of Sousou's hands and into the air (giving Sousou an eye-popping view of Kan'u's underwear in the process).

At that moment, a white horse leaped between them, its blue-haired rider snatching Kan'u's weapon out of the air before bringing it down in a deadly arc that sent Sousou's nearby soldiers scrambling for cover. Kan'u then made a leap of her own, turning a somersault in midair before landing behind the white-clad rider. Even as her chief retainers dove to either side to avoid the improvised weapons thrown by Kan'u, Sousou went to reach for her scythe, but quite suddenly there was another horse pulling up before her, and Sousou felt the cold point of a sword at her throat. For a moment, she silently cursed herself: the great Sou Moutoku, fatally distracted by a panty flash.

"So you're Sousou Moutoku," said an unfamiliar voice. "For some reason I thought you'd be… taller."

Sousou looked up the length of the blade to see that it was carried by a young woman with lovely black hair - much like Kan'u's, she noticed - but with stunning blue eyes where Unchou's were brown. Seated behind her on the horse (one of Sousou's own, by its markings) was that worthless man-whore of Gentoku's, who obviously had managed to escape a well-deserved death yet again.

From behind her, Sousou heard the sound of another sword being unsheathed, accompanied by a furious cry from Kakouton. "*Kisama!"*

"Shunran," she said calmly, holding out one hand to stop her hot-headed general, "stay your hand. If this magnificent creature had wanted me dead, I would be."

"Well, let's just say I've probably screwed up history enough for one day without killing one of China's greatest generals," the black-haired girl said, her sword-arm not wavering.

"Speaking in riddles again, Azuma-dono?" came the very unwelcome voice of Chou'un Shiryuu, who had indeed been the other rider. Holding her men at bay with the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, while Kan'u, seated behind her, did the same with Shiryuu's own spear, the blue-haired general gave Sousou a thin smile. "We'll be

taking our leave now, Moutoku-dono," she said, adjusting a small bundle that was strapped to her chest.

"Sousou-dono, we were at peace for so long," Kazuto said, giving her a look more suited to a whipped canine. "None of us want this war."

"Don't presume to speak for *me*, Hongo-dono," Sousou smiled humorlessly at the man. "The land will be united, in the name of the emperor. To continue to resist is foolish. If *you* do not wish for war, then you may submit."

Shiryuu laughed, and was about to speak again when her eyes suddenly crossed, and she clutched the bundle against her with her free arm, muttering something about how she'd never be able to survive motherhood.

As it turned out, Kazuto had more to say. "Sousou-dono, I'm sure we could work out a peaceful solution. Maybe if you and I were to meet alone… perhaps over a dinner, with some wine…"

The stranger made a sour face. "Hongo-dono, please tell me you're not hitting on the commander of the opposing army."

"Hey, I can't help it. She's just too - *urgh!* " The rest of his comment went unheard, as the black-haired girl buried the elbow of her free arm into his midsection.

"As I was saying, Sousou-dono," Chou'un went on, "we'll be taking our leave. You may have taken Changban, but if you try to follow us past the river, it will be at your own peril. Come, Azuma-dono!"

The black-haired girl (Azuma, was it?) withdrew her sword, and the two horses charged away in the direction Gentoku's forces had retreated.

Kakouton immediately began barking orders to her men. "Riders, give chase! Take them down before they reach the bridge! Archers,

aim for their mounts!"

"Let them go," Sousou countered. "We've won this day, Shunran, and we'll have them soon enough. We already vastly outnumber them, and once our reinforcements arrive, we'll overwhelm Chouhi's little rear guard at the bridge and continue our march."

"Karin-sama!" came a distressed voice, as her chief strategist Jun'iku hurried toward her.

"Report, Keifa," Sousou nodded to the younger woman.

"Karin-sama, our scouts report a large force moving in from our right flank. They fly the flag of Bachou Mouki!"

"Mouki? She shouldn't be here…" Sousou frowned.

"There's more, though! Kouchuu Kanshou's armies are marching in from our left flank, along with the bulk of Kan'u's troops! They've already massacred the first of our reinforcements coming in from the main detachment!"

"We'll be pinned if we stay here," Kakouen said grimly.

"Your orders, Karin-sama?" Kakouton asked.

Sousou let out an angry sigh. "What is it about Gentoku that attracts such accomplished generals to her service?" She thought of the new face amongst them, and her frown faded into a smile as she considered the possibility of another black-haired trophy in her future. "Not to mention the way she manages to get all the pretty ones."

"Karin-sama!" Kakouton cried in dismay.

"Peace, Shunran. Your place in my bed is secure." Sousou then turned to address the troops. "Fall back! We regroup at Changban, and prepare for our next assault there!"

The next events were a blur of surreality for Hazuki. After their brief "detour" to rescue Kan'u from enemy clutches, they continued riding until they met up with the rear guard at the single bridge over the river: twenty elite mounted troops led by Chouhi Yokutoku (who naturally turned out to be a tall, wiry woman with a shock of flaming red hair). The original intention had been to cut the bridge down rather than let the enemy cross, but with Sousou now in retreat and allied armies moving in from either side, they elected instead to hold this position while Chouhi herself accompanied the others to meet with Ryuubi and her chief strategist at their new base of operations.

Not long after this, they were joined by the leaders of the other two armies, who were also riding to Ryuubi's side: Bachou Mouki (a brash-voiced, brown-haired woman with a broad grin and a ridiculously long and high-crested ponytail), and Kouchuu Kanshou (an elegant archer who, like her daughter, had long, flowing purple hair and a bustline that made Hazuki wince at the thought of what riding a horse had to feel like for her).

It was at this point that Hazuki realized, with a slow, almost overwhelming shock, that she was riding from battle alongside the Five Tiger Generals.

Even the knowledge that this world's history was markedly different from her own (if she remembered correctly, Ma Chao and Huang Zhong should not have even entered the service of Liu Bei by the time of the Battle of Changban) could not dispel the sheer awe she felt at the idea that she, a high school girl from as mundane a world as any, was in the company of five of history's greatest warriors and leaders.

Their ride took them alongside a long train of refugees: men, women and children displaced from their homes by Sousou's invasion. Another ugly reality to remind Hazuki that this war was about more than glory and honor. Still, perhaps befitting this world and its larger-than-life heroes, the people seemed to be in good spirits as they

made their slow way along the beaten track, and several times Hazuki saw children waving at them and cheering as they passed.

When they arrived at the next village, Hazuki was somewhat surprised to see that soldiers and able-bodied refugees alike were already hard at work, setting up something of a tent city for shelter, passing out provisions, and tending to the weak and the wounded. Everything seemed to be moving like clockwork, with all hands participating: it was as though even the horror of being driven from their homes by war could not conquer the optimism of the people under the protection of Ryuubi Gentoku and her generals.

Pages took the reins of their horses as they reached the outskirts of the village, and the six women and one man (and one baby) dismounted to take the rest of the way on foot. Now Hazuki was not merely riding with the great warlords: she was walking shoulder to shoulder with them.

Chou'un stumbled slightly, looking perhaps a bit wobbly in the knees, but Hazuki and Kan'u were both there to steady her. "Sei, what's wrong?" Kan'u asked.

"The child is nothing short of relentless," Chou'un growled.

Kouchuu giggled at the display. "Oh, poor Sei-chan! Would you like me to take him? I'm a bit more experienced in such matters."

"My thanks, Shion, but this is *my* test of will to endure," Chou'un smiled tightly.

Much like the other, larger city that Hazuki had visited on her last trip to this world, this one had an elaborate mansion-house at its center: the home of the local lord. As they approached, Hazuki saw two women in conversation with an elderly man in nobles' clothing. The taller of the two was a slender young lady with long, straw-colored hair spilling out from a violet beret, with the rest of her ornate dress varying between that same violet and emerald green. The second was a rather voluptuous, terrifyingly *moe* woman whose pink hair

was decorated with feathers. Before Hazuki could even puzzle over who these might be, Kazuto broke ranks with them and raced toward the pink-haired woman, giving a shout of "Touka-chan!"

"Kazuto!" the woman shouted in reply, her eyes and mouth alike going wide for a moment before she rushed out into the man's arms and practically started making out with him right there in front of the world.

"That would be Ryuubi-dono, then?" Hazuki asked Chou'un quietly.

"Indeed," Chou'un nodded, looking amused at the display.

"They… do that," Bachou shrugged. "It takes some getting used to."

"So you say," Chouhi sighed, "but I don't know that I *ever* will, *nano da* ."

Kan'u stepped forward and loudly cleared her throat. Once she had the lovebirds' attention, she bowed her head and gave a *bao quan* salute. "Touka-ane-ue, we have returned from the battlefield. Changban is lost to us, but Sousou's armies have advanced no further."

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" Ryuubi smiled, but then checked herself. "I mean, not about the losing part, but about the stopping part. Don't you think, Shuri-chan?"

The blonde woman (whom Hazuki realized could be none other than Shokatsuryou Koumei, the great strategist of the Shu kingdom) nodded in agreement. "It was timely that Sui-san and Shion-san arrived when they did. Aisha-san, I should very much like to hear the details of the battle, so that we may plan our next move."

"Of course, Shuri-chan," Kan'u nodded.

Hazuki was doing her best to keep up with the barrage of what she could only assume were the *mana*, or "true" names, of those

present. She knew that she dared not use them herself, of course, but at least she'd have some hope of following the conversation if she knew whose was whose.

"If I may interrupt the strategy session before it truly begins," Chou'un spoke up, stepping forward to address her mistress, "Touka-dono, I have returned with the young prince."

"Ryuuzen!" gasped Ryuubi, tears springing to her eyes as she looked from Chou'un to Kazuto. "Sei-chan, someone told me you'd… you'd deserted us, and I knew you *never* would, but… you went back alone to rescue them?"

"She saved us both, Touka-chan," Kazuto nodded. "She and our new friend Hazuki-chan."

"Azuma-dono," Chou'un corrected him in an acid tone.

"Azuma-dono," Kazuto quickly agreed.

Ryuubi looked nothing short of beside herself. "Sei-chan, I… thank you *so much*, Sei-chan, but… please, I know how reckless you can be, and… I can't lose you. More importantly, *Aisha-chan* can't lose you. Don't *ever* again take a chance like that alone, Sei-chan, *please*."

"As it turns out, I was not alone," Chou'un smiled, turning to wink over her shoulder at Hazuki.

"How can I ever repay you for this, Sei-chan?" Ryuubi asked, now close to tears in spite of her smile.

"Offer your breast, Touka-dono," Chou'un said simply.

There was a pause, and then Ryuubi blushed a deep red, even as Kan'u turned shocked eyes toward Chou'un.

The blue-haired general rolled her eyes. "It's not for *me*, Touka-dono."

"Huh? Oh!" Ryuubi exclaimed as the penny dropped, and she quickly began unfastening the front of her shirt. Hazuki looked away, out of reflex if nothing else, but not before she saw Kazuto lean in, looking very interested in the goings-on. Chou'un pulled the baby from her breast with an audible wet popping noise, then immediately transferred the child to his mother's arms, where he quickly resumed his earlier action, albeit on a different nipple.

"Now if you will excuse me, Touka-dono," Chou'un said briskly, as she adjusted the front of her kimono and divested herself of the sling, "I am in desperate need of a talk with Aisha. Alone. In our tent." She grabbed Kan'u's hand and began pulling the bewildered black-haired woman away with her.

With a knowing smile, Kouchuu stepped forward to take the place of the other two. "While those two are occupied, perhaps I could give my report first, Shuri-chan?"

"Of… of course," Koumei nodded, looking a touch embarrassed.

Chou'un paused a moment beside Hazuki as the archer continued her conversation with the strategist and the parents cooed over their returned child. "Tell me something, Hazuki. Is your golden-tressed guide with the interesting hat likely to whisk you off in the immediate future?"

"I… I don't think so," Hazuki blinked.

"Very good. As much as I am looking forward to a proper reunion, there is something that simply cannot wait. I shall return shortly."

"Sei, what's going on?" Kan'u asked, looking confused and a little exasperated.

Chou'un turned a smoldering look on the black-haired woman. "I need your… *counsel*, Aisha."

Kan'u's eyes widened. "Oh! Um, I see! Why didn't you say so?"

The two departed for parts unknown, leaving Hazuki in the company of the remaining two generals. "Azuma-dono, was it?" Bachou smiled, giving her a slap on the shoulder. She then paused, and with a more careful hand rubbed the material of Hazuki's *seifuku* . "Hmm, what fabric is this? It's not unlike what *Goshujin-sama* wears."

"That's kind of a long story in itself," Hazuki said as she cast a quick glance back toward Kazuto. Now that things were calming down, there was something about his story that felt strange. A time portal? Presumably from a future that had not yet been written in this book? "Suffice to say I'm not from around here."

"Ooh, I love your sword," Chouhi added, crouching beside her to study the workmanship of her katana. "Wherever 'not from around here' is, they do good work!"

"And I've completely forgotten my manners," Bachou chuckled. "I am called Bachou, and my style name is Mouki. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Azuma-dono."

"And I'm Chouhi," the younger woman nodded. "My style name is Yokutoku. So where did you meet Chou'un, anyway?"

"I… traveled with her for a time," Hazuki said, realizing suddenly that she had no frame of reference as to *when* this had been. "Listen, I hate to be rude, but… is she all right? She seemed a bit… tense."

"Oh, trust me, she and Kan'u are just fine," Bachou laughed. "This wouldn't be the first time they burned off some excess battlefield energy in the bedroom, as it were."

Hazuki gasped, and suddenly felt her heart grow very full. "They're… together, then?" she asked, scarcely daring to believe it.

"Inseparable, *nano da*," Chouhi said with a melodramatic roll of the eyes.

"That's… I'm so glad!" Hazuki nodded, finding herself smiling like a fool. "When last I saw her, she was…" She shook her head. "Well, never mind that. I'm very glad to hear it."

"If you ask me, they'd be even better fighters if they'd save all that passion for battle," Chouhi frowned.

"Oh?" Bachou said, cocking an eyebrow at the red-haired woman. "That's never stopped *you* before, has it?"

Chouhi blushed and shot the older woman an intent look, and Hazuki had the sudden uncomfortable feeling that she was in the middle of some sort of lovers' spat. Luckily, though, the topic of conversation quickly turned back to a simpler, gentler topic, as the two women regaled one another with a recounting of their respective parts in the most recent battle. Hazuki merely listened, again finding herself somewhat in awe to be in the presence of these legendary figures.

A short while later, Chou'un and Kan'u returned. To Hazuki's surprise, it was Kan'u who approached her first, giving the younger girl a smile and a respectful *bao quan* . "Azuma-dono, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping Chou'un this day, and for your part in seeing her returned safely to us alongside our master and the young prince."

"It was an honor and a pleasure, Kan'u-dono." Hazuki bowed to the great general.

"Also," Kan'u went on, her smile deepening as she glanced at Chou'un, "if I am remembering the story correctly, I believe I have something else for which to thank you as well. While I have never known Chou'un to hesitate in seeking something she wants, I owe you a debt of gratitude for your part in convincing her to… follow through."

"Thank you, Kan'u-dono," Hazuki said, her throat tightening with emotion at the idea that she had played some small part in bringing these two together. "That means more to me than you know."

Kan'u nodded to her, a surprisingly tender look crossing her features. "And please, call me by my *mana*, Aisha."

"A- Aisha," Hazuki stammered, feeling that fool's grin taking over her face again. "Thank you, Aisha-dono. Then it would be an honor if you would call me by my given name of Hazuki."

"Now then, Hazuki, let me get a good look at you," Chou'un said with a broad smile, taking the younger girl by the shoulders and looking her over. Her expression gradually changed to one of amazement. "You look as though you haven't aged at all," she breathed.

Hazuki was about to say the same in reply, but now that they were in a position where she could truly take in the sight of her old friend, she realized that this was simply not so. There were flecks of white in the pale blue of Chou'un's hair now, and her face, while as lovely as ever, had a few extra lines, though at least they looked as though they had been brought about by smiling. And while her skin was still smooth and unblemished for the most part, her once-delicate hands were now showing the signs of years of weapon use, and the broad violet sash of her kimono, tied directly beneath her breasts, now seemed to be at least somewhat for support as well as decoration.

Realization struck. She had met Chou'un before even the Yellow Turban Rebellion, and for them to have now arrived at the Battle of Changban… "Sei," she choked out, "how long has it been?"

Chou'un gave her a thoughtful frown. "A dozen years? Maybe more?" Her expression then changed to a wry smile. "Have those years been less than kind to me, then?"

"No, no, Sei," Hazuki shook her head, her eyes stinging with tears. "You're… you're beautiful, but… you're…"

You're mortal.

The reason for her visit returning to her in a sudden flood of grief, Hazuki fell to her knees before the friend she had lost once already,

and knew she would soon lose again. Without a moment's hesitation, Chou'un knelt beside her and wrapped her arms around the suddenly trembling girl, whispering assurances. "It's all right, Hazuki. You're among friends here."

She almost laughed through her tears, remembering when she herself had said something similar to Ryofu not so very long ago. "I know," she said instead. "I know I am…"

A short time later, Chou'un led Hazuki to a nearby rocky hillside, a bottle in one hand and a ceramic pot in the other. There, they found a flat, solid outcropping which gave them a stunning view of the soon-to-be setting sun shining through a scattering of low clouds to the west.

"It has long been a custom of mine, after battle," Chou'un said as she settled to the flat stone beneath them, "to seek out the world's beauty from a high place, and if possible, to enjoy some wine and menma." She gave Hazuki a smile. "As yet, you are only the second person I've willingly brought with me for this particular ritual."

"I presume Aisha was the other?" Hazuki asked as she sat down close by.

"Indeed. *Aruji* has followed me a time or two, but I did say *willingly*, and at any rate, I daresay he won't do it again." She gave Hazuki a look of dangerous amusement, as much as this was possible. "Nobody eats my menma without either asking or being offered." She then opened the seal on the ceramic pot and inhaled deeply of the scent from within. "You, my dear, are being offered."

"Thank you," Hazuki smiled, taking the set of chopsticks Chou'un held out to her. Mindful of her friend's love for her bamboo shoots, Hazuki let her take the first piece before following suit.

"Ah," Chou'un sighed after finishing her first taste. "There is nothing in the world quite like a good menma after a particularly trying day."

"You mean the battle?"

"The battle was nothing," Chou'un waved. "Riding that distance with a hungry baby attached to my breast, on the other hand? I almost thought I'd begin to lactate based on his sheer persistence alone."

"You did seem rather… affected by that," Hazuki ventured. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course," Chou'un smiled thinly. "Just an old curse of mine, nothing more."

"Curse..?"

"Hmm, well, I suppose there's no harm in you knowing," Chou'un said with a wry laugh. "I have a bit of a problem with… arousal."

"In what way?"

"In that it tends to come too quickly," Chou'un said evenly. "And then, all too often, so do I. It's not as bad as it was in years past, but… I will merely say that certain parts of me are far more sensitive than others, and leave it at that. Except to add that it was quite a test of will to ensure that my first orgasm at the attentions of a male did *not* in fact come to pass this day."

"I… see," Hazuki said slowly, a bit bewildered by this confession (not to mention slightly disturbed).

"Now… Hazuki," Chou'un said in an unusually deliberate tone, "On a somewhat related topic, I have a question to ask, and I shall need to ask your forgiveness in advance if it seems too… self-important or forward of me."

"What is it?" Hazuki asked, puzzled.

Chou'un looked out toward the sun for a moment, obviously choosing her words carefully. "While I am pleased beyond description to see you again… I cannot help but wonder… if you

have perhaps returned to me with the intention of… taking me up on my previous offer from those years past?"

Hazuki blinked a few times, then laughed lightly. "No, Sei, no… I didn't come for *that* at all."

"Ah," Chou'un nodded, and to Hazuki's amusement, she looked more relieved than disappointed. "I meant every word I said when last we met, of course," she went on in a slightly hurried voice. "And you're every bit as lovely as you were then, which baffles me greatly, but… my situation has… *changed* since then."

"I know, Sei," Hazuki chuckled, "and I'm very happy that things turned out well for you. Besides, my situation has changed as well."

"Oh, has it?" Chou'un grinned. "You found your goddess, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Hazuki nodded. "That has a lot to do with why I'm here, actually. I… did a service for the goddesses who watch over creation, and… this is my reward."

"Your… reward," Chou'un said in a quiet voice, a softly amazed expression lighting her eyes.

"Well… yes," Hazuki nodded, suddenly feeling embarrassed, "but… at any rate, I didn't *find* her: not in the way that you found Aisha. Hatsumi and I were… never meant to be, at least in that way."

Chou'un's features fell. "You have my sympathies," she said quietly.

"No, no, it's all turned out fine for me," Hazuki smiled, waving her hands vaguely to dismiss her friend's crestfallen look. "I have a new home now, with two very dear women sharing my life."

"Two?" Chou'un repeated, arching both eyebrows.

"Um, yes," Hazuki nodded, feeling herself blush under that suddenly intent gaze. "We're still… working out all the details, but we've made a commitment to one another."

"Hmm, should I be happy for you, then?"

"Well… *I* certainly am."

"Then that is all I needed to know," Chou'un giggled. She then opened the bottle, took a sip from it, and offered it to Hazuki. "A drink in honor of a happy ending to our quests for love, then?"

Hazuki accepted the bottle, but before she could take that drink, she found herself lightly blushing yet again. "You know… where I come from, sharing a bottle with someone like this is considered an indirect kiss."

"How… odd," Chou'un smiled bemusedly. "Well, if it bothers you, Hazuki, I could simply give you a properly *direct* one and be done with it."

She timed the latter words just as Hazuki was tipping the bottle to her lips, and it was all Hazuki could do to take a burning swallow rather than shower the other woman with her mouthful of wine. "*Sei!"*

"I was merely offering," Chou'un said with a shrug.

"I thought your situation had changed!"

"It has. I'm quite certain Aisha would be quick to forgive an innocent peck for an old friend. Why, did you think I had something… *deeper* in mind?"

Unbidden, the memory of Tamao's awkward proactive forgiveness came to mind. "Don't tempt me, Sei," Hazuki snorted.

"Well, if I managed to do *that*, perhaps the years have been kind to me after all," Chou'un said with a satisfied smile.

"Oh, please. I can only *hope* that I look as good as you when I'm in my thirties." Immediately after the words were said, though, Hazuki

felt a pang in her heart at the realization that this was not going to be a problem for her at all thanks to the *Souma* .

"Which brings me to my next question for you, as it happens," Chou'un nodded. She paused to take another bite of her menma before continuing. "Now… my sense of passing time has never been exceptionally accurate, but upon thinking further, I am quite certain that it has been closer to fifteen or perhaps even twenty years since our last meeting, Hazuki. How exactly is it that you are *not* in your thirties? I am quite certain you were not *that* much younger than I."

"That's… a tricky question to answer," Hazuki sighed. "You… you *know* that I'm not from this world, right?"

"So you've said, yes."

Hazuki searched for a metaphor, then decided that the truth would work just as well. "Do you remember what I told you about the Great Library?"

"Hmmm, refresh my memory, please?"

"Of course. Think of this world as a book on a shelf in an infinite library. My book is on a different bookcase a couple floors away. The goddesses can travel between them as they wish, and… those of us who were touched by the goddesses' power can do so as well, but only with their help."

"The energy you share with Ren-dono," Chou'un nodded.

"Exactly. After Lilith and I found Hatsumi, they returned to their task of watching over the Great Library, and I went to live in my book, where I met and fell in love with two wonderful ladies."

"A fine tale, that."

"Yes, but…" Hazuki thought about how much she should say, then took another sip of wine to brace herself. "The books are constantly

being written as time passes, but… some of them are written… more *slowly* than others. For me, it's been less than a year since I saw you last."

"Ah, I think I see where this is going," Chou'un nodded again. "So perhaps a year being written in your world is the same as twenty being written in this one."

Hazuki wanted to agree, and let that be the end of it, but she could not bring herself to keep the truth from Chou'un. "Not… exactly. You see…" She paused again, then ground the rest out. "A lot more than twenty years have passed in this world."

"I… trust there is more to this riddle, then?" Chou'un asked quietly, looking like she was already starting to figure it out.

"Yes, there is," Hazuki sighed. "If it were just a matter of traveling from my world to this one, I'm sure all I'd have to do is ask Lilith or Hatsumi, and they'd probably oblige me. But… traveling to what is currently the *present* time in this world would mean…"

"That I was already gone," Chou'un finished for her.

Hazuki closed her eyes. "Yes."

There was a long silence, and Hazuki felt the need to fill it somehow, so she continued speaking. "That was why it took a favor from the goddesses for me to have this chance. By sending me to you, I had to travel into the *past* of your world. In return for my service, they've allowed me this, and they'll do their best to make sure that my presence here doesn't wreck a history that's already written."

She heard Chou'un take a breath, then hesitate. "I wonder…" the older woman said at last, but then she quickly amended herself. "No, never mind that."

"Never mind what?" Hazuki asked, opening her eyes again but not yet daring to look at Chou'un's face.

"For a moment I considered asking if you knew when it would be," Chou'un said delicately. "But that would be foolish of me to ask, truly. Unless… I was supposed to die *this* day?"

Hazuki shook her head. "No, Sei, not at all. You were always destined to save Ryuubi's child. Honestly, I don't know when it will happen. Just… that it *will* ."

"Well, of course it will," Chou'un said gently. "Hazuki, death is part of my everyday life. I've sent countless men to their deaths: some at my command, and others at the end of my spear. The thought that I must one day face my own is never far from my mind."

"I'm sorry, Sei…" Hazuki whispered.

"For what?" the other woman laughed softly. "You've nothing to apologize for. If anything, I'm grateful for the reminder."

"The reminder that you're going to die?"

Chou'un shook her head. "Not at all. The reminder to take moments such as these to seek out the world's beauty. The reminder to fight every battle knowing that it may be my last, and the reminder to cherish every night I spend with Aisha, whether it be in the throes of passion or the simple warmth of an embrace. And along with these, my dear friend, you've given me something new and precious to remember as well."

A warm hand cupped Hazuki's cheek, then, and she looked up to see Chou'un staring at her, her violet eyes shining with emotion. "You made a bargain with the gods for a chance to see me again," Chou'un said softly. "I shall not forget this, Hazuki, for as long as I may live."

The two women fell into a warm embrace, then, and Hazuki once more let her own tears go. "I missed you, Sei."

"Likewise, Azuma-dono," Chou'un said in reply, her warm tone at odds with her teasing formality.

For a long while, no further words were spoken, and eventually the two settled in to watch the sunset, leaning on one another as they continued to share the wine and bamboo shoots. "Now I only wish Ren-dono were here," Chou'un said at last. "Or will you be traveling to see her as well?"

"I'll see Ren again," Hazuki nodded. "In fact… I already have, but it hasn't happened yet at this point in history, so if you *do* see her again, please don't tell her I said so?"

Chou'un gave another soft chuckle. "Being in the service of goddesses seems unnecessarily complicated."

"And sometimes it is," Hazuki agreed.

"As it happens, I may be seeing her soon," Chou'un added. "Ren-dono has stayed out of this war thus far, but Ryuubi-dono is considering sending me to her home in the mountains to convince her to lend us her strength."

"Do you think she will?" Hazuki asked, genuinely curious. Ryofu had said that she had not "yet" chosen a side by this point in history, after all.

"I believe Ren-dono has grown weary of battle, to be honest," Chou'un considered. "Moreover, she is reluctant to side with Sousou because of her affection for us, and yet she is reluctant to side with us because she feels she owes Sousou a debt of gratitude for sparing the life of her mistress Toutaku some years ago. If she decides to remain neutral, I shall certainly understand, and meanwhile, Ryuubi will continue seeking an alliance with Son Chuubo to aid us in our stand against Sousou."

Hazuki nodded, hoping that one day she might hear the rest of this story from Ryofu herself. If this world's history continued to resemble

the story Hazuki knew, the alliance between Ryuubi and Sonken would soon deliver Sousou a significant defeat at the Battle of Red Cliffs. With Ryofu present as well, she could not hazard a guess at what might come about.

Silence fell once more, and the last of the sun's disc dipped beneath the horizon, though the distant clouds were still lit in vivid oranges and pinks. "Will you be leaving soon?" Chou'un asked her then.

"Probably," Hazuki sighed. "The longer I stay, the more work I'm making for Lilith, and I don't know that I can count on her good graces for *too* long, favors owed or not."

Chou'un straightened up, then, and turned to face Hazuki. She then reached around to the back of her sash, pulled something from beneath it, and held it out to the younger woman. "Take this with you when you leave."

Hazuki looked down, and her eyes widened as she saw what Chou'un was offering her. "Sei, I… I can't! This is yours!"

"And now I wish for it to be yours," Chou'un insisted, pressing the black-and-gold butterfly mask into Hazuki's hand. "A remembrance of our brief time in this world, if you will."

"I don't need this as a remembrance," Hazuki said, shaking her head. "Ren brought me back my own mask already - er, though she doesn't know that yet, either - and… I think my naginata is probably still back in the Library. I *can't* take this."

"Then consider it a loan," Chou'un smirked, "and you can return it to me when next we meet." Before Hazuki could protest, the older woman then leaned forward, put her free arm around Hazuki's shoulders, and pulled her closer, until their foreheads were touching. "And know this, Hazuki: we *will* meet again. If I must find a god or a goddess of my own to bargain with, then so be it, but I swear by Earth and Heaven that this will *not* be our last meeting."

Hazuki nodded, wanting desperately to believe this, even though she knew better. "Thank you, Sei," she whispered, closing her fingers around the edge of the mask.

Chou'un tipped her face back, gave Hazuki a warm kiss on the forehead, then settled once more at her side. "Meanwhile, surely the goddesses won't mind if you and I spend a bit more time here this evening? Truly, how much damage could it do to history if you and I continue our chat in this tiny corner of a vast world?"

"I suppose that's true," Hazuki smiled, laying her head on Chou'un's shoulder. "What should we talk about?"

"For starters, perhaps tell me about the ladies in your life? How long have you been at their side?"

"I've known them for a few months, though the… well, you could say that the levels of *intimacy* have changed over that time."

"Exactly what I hoped you *would* say," Chou'un said knowingly, her voice taking on a humored tone. "If you can forgive an old woman for her perverted thoughts, are all three of you truly… *intimate*, then?"

"To some degree we all are, yes," Hazuki smiled, wondering if the wine had anything to do with her willingness to say so. "Though in terms of actual, um…"

"Lovemaking?" Chou'un supplied.

"Yes, um… Only with one of them. So far."

"Ah, what a shame."

"Actually, it's really not," Hazuki smiled. "Whether or not it comes to that eventually, I know we'll always be together, and that's… a happiness I can barely describe."

"Hmm, yes, that does sound appealing," Chou'un agreed.

A thought occurred to Hazuki, and once again she wondered whether it was the wine to blame, or simply the raw emotions of this reunion. "Actually, Sei… could I ask you something?"

"By all means."

Hazuki paused, wondering how best to put this. "You were right, you know."

"About what?"

"About being with another woman. It really *is* a lot of trial and error, isn't it?"

"I did try to warn you, yes," Chou'un giggled.

"Yes, well… Sometimes it seems like it's more error than anything else, and… I was wondering if… maybe I could ask my master in naginata and the Zen of lesbianism for a bit of advice?"

"Hmm. Words are all well and good, Hazuki, but… to truly *advise* you, I would have to do so by demonstration."

Hazuki could not help but blush, but she was still smiling. "Somehow I thought you might say that."

"You know me too well. Would you like that, then? A demonstration?"

"I don't think either of us has had enough wine for that," Hazuki snorted. "Besides, our situations have changed, remember?"

"Azuma-dono, I'm shocked!" Chou'un gasped theatrically. "Of *course* our situations have changed. I was *in no way* suggesting that you and I shed both our clothing and our commitments and make love under the gloaming skies even as the evening's first stars peek through to bear us witness."

"Oh, you *weren't*, were you?"

"Not at all. These rocks are *far* too uncomfortable for that."

Hazuki laughed at the teasing, so reminiscent of their time on the road together. "Never change, Sei."

"That being said," Chou'un went on, "if you truly wish for a demonstration, there are other ways to go about it which would break neither of our respective vows to the women we love."

"Are there, now?"

"Indeed. You see, I am quite certain that I could convince Aisha to allow *you* to bear witness to *our* activities. Purely as a favor to the friend who did so much to bring us together, of course."

A rush of images danced through Hazuki's imagination briefly before her mind shut them down purely out of reflex. "Don't tempt me, Sei," she sighed.

"Ah, twice in one conversation? I believe I've done my work well, then."

When the familiar green aura faded, Hazuki found herself standing once more in the Great Library. She took a dazed look around to see that everyone was standing precisely where they had been when she left. "How long was I gone?" she asked.

"Only a few moments," Tamao frowned as she stepped closer. "Did it work? Did you get to see her?"

Hazuki smiled wearily and enfolded the smaller girl in her arms. "Yes," she said quietly. "Yes, I certainly did."

"I'm so glad," Tamao whispered against her.

"Welcome back, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru smiled, adding herself to the hug. "I trust you'll have a story to tell us later?"

"Definitely," Hazuki nodded. She then looked to the two Keepers and gave them a wan smile. "Thank you," she nodded to them both, hoping that these simple words could properly express her gratitude. "I hope I didn't make things too difficult for you, Lilith. How much did I end up changing history, anyhow?"

Lilith exchanged a look with her fellow goddess, then sighed. "You didn't change a thing, Hazuki-chan."

"What?" Hazuki asked, as a sudden misgiving seized her. "What do you mean? Did… none of that actually happen?"

"No, *every moment* of it happened," Lilith frowned. "What just took place is what we call a predetermined event, Hazuki-chan. You can think of it as destiny, or whatever, but the truth of the matter is that you were *always* intended to participate in this world's Battle of Changban. Your second visit to this book was already written in its history, and you merely fulfilled what was there on the pages. So… no changes to worry about."

"How is that possible?" Tamao gasped.

"No," Lilith said simply, shaking her head. "Waaaay too early for that talk, Tamao-chan. Just accept that this was meant to be."

Hazuki's head spun. "Wait… do you mean… none of that was of my own free will? I was just… acting out a part?"

"Noooo, no no no," Lilith sighed, running a hand back through her hair. "We're not having the free will versus destiny talk either. Not now. The short form of the answer is that it was both, and that's all you're getting for now."

"It's best not to think too much about it," Eve added. "Just… treasure your new memories, Hazuki-chan."

"Yeah, I think I can do that," Hazuki whispered, once more pulling her dear ones to her and holding them with all her strength.

As the first rays of dawn began to light the eastern sky, Chou'un and Kan'u emerged from their tent and began making their way slowly around the encampment. They walked hand in hand, each giving the other an occasional sleepy smile. There had not been much rest for either of them this past evening, but as always, it had been more than worth it.

After a while, they came across Bachou listening to a report from one of her soldiers. After sending the man on his way, she looked over and noticed them. "Good morning," she nodded, absently rubbing her left arm.

"Good morning, Sui," Kan'u smiled in reply. "Anything new?"

"Nothing earth-shattering," Bachou shrugged. "The people are settling in as best they can, and we've got plenty of tent space for everyone. Food's not a problem yet, though I reckon we're going to need to open the war coffers soon and bring in surplus supplies from the nearest towns. Patrols have been running on shifts through the night, and the area seems secure. Our detachment back at the bridge reports that their scouts haven't heard a peep out of Sousou yet."

"Welcome news, that," Chou'un nodded. "Perhaps we'll have time to meet with Sonken-dono after all."

"We can only hope," Bachou agreed, still rubbing her arm. "Sei, where's your friend, anyway?"

Chou'un exchanged glances with Kan'u, then smiled somewhat wistfully. "She's gone home to her loved ones."

"Already?" Bachou frowned. "I was looking forward to a spar with her. I could use more practice against a talented sword-wielder."

"Sui, what's wrong with your arm?" Kan'u asked suddenly. "Were you hurt yesterday?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Bachou said, as though just now noticing that she had been massaging it. "No, it was the strangest thing. Just a short while ago, there was an old man carrying an enormous basket on his back. The poor fellow looked like he could barely walk, so I took the basket for him and brought him to a place where he could rest."

Something fired in Chou'un's memory, and she quite suddenly felt herself much more awake. She remembered the open road, shortly after she and Hazuki had first parted ways, and an "old" man from distant lands who had somehow led her right to the place where she would find the clue that led her back to Kan'u's side.

"Afterward," Bachou continued, "he took me by the arm and said-"

Chou'un was about to complete the thought for her, but to her shock, Kan'u did so instead. "A traveler's blessing to you?"

"Exactly! He said: 'A traveler's blessing to you, Ba Mouki.' I hadn't even told him my name! And… the strangest part?" She looked again at the spot on her arm that she had been rubbing. "His hand was very warm, but in a soothing way - not like he had a fever or anything - and… I can still kind of feel it."

"Aisha, how did you know what he said?" Chou'un asked.

"Because I met someone who said the same thing to me," Kan'u explained. "It was last night, while you were still with Azuma-dono. I helped an old man, in almost exactly the way you just described, Sui, and… he said the same thing: 'A traveler's blessing to you, Kan Unchou.' And… yes, I remember feeling that same warmth, but… I thought nothing of it at the time."

Chou'un looked from one of them to the other. "How very… *interesting*…" she pondered, feeling an unexpected smile cross her face.

Eve looked up from the book in her lap as Lilith returned, stretching hugely and letting out a yawn. "Is everyone safely on their way, then?" the younger goddess asked.

"I sent the Four Horsemen back home myself, and Ken-chan's taking care of getting Ryofu-chan back to her world. Alone at last."

"Alone indeed," Eve smiled. "And no more intruder, thankfully." She closed the book that their unwelcome visitor had been inhabiting and set it on the table. She would return to her efforts of healing the damage later, but for now, she was exhausted. "I think we're both due for a rest," she yawned as well, then rose and began walking toward their bedroom.

"Eve," Lilith said simply.

Eve felt herself shiver at the warning tone in her sister's voice. She should have known it wouldn't be so easy. "What is it?"

"When are we going to tell Hazuki-chan?"

"Tell her what?"

Lilith sighed impatiently. "When are we going to tell her that this 'predetermined event' was of her own making all along?"

"She's not a danger to us, Lilith," Eve said, unable to keep the slight quaver out of her voice.

"I never said she was," Lilith replied. "Now, in case you've forgotten, I'm very fond of Hazuki-chan as well. Don't you think we should do something before she *can* become a danger to us? You saw what just happened. You *must* know that she's got more than just *Souma* inside her now."

"We can't be sure of that," Eve countered. "It may not have been her doing at all."

Lilith held up both hands to her fellow Keeper. "All I'm saying is that we need to be prepared for the possibility. Could you keep it in mind, at least? Please?"

"I'll… keep it in mind," Eve nodded slowly, then took another step.

"Eve," Lilith called again in that same tone, again bringing her to a halt.

"Yes, Lilith?"

"When are you going to tell Hazuki-chan what *really* happened to Chou'un?"

"When I have a more definitive answer myself," Eve sighed.

"She should know about this, Eve."

"And what would you have me tell her?" Eve said in a heated voice as she whirled around to face the other goddess. "That one of her dearest friends *no longer exists?* That the essence of her life did not return to me after her death, and even I, the life-bearing goddess, cannot find a trace of her in all creation? Is *that* what you would have me say, Lilith?"

The elder Keeper crossed her arms. "I'm just saying that she deserves to know."

"Knowing this would *haunt* her," Eve insisted. "Until I have a better idea of what happened, I won't do her such cruelty as that." She then turned and began walking away, hoping that Lilith would just this once leave things be.

She knew better, of course. " *Eve,"* Lilith said again, her voice uncommonly sharp.

" *What?!"* Eve exploded, the emotions of the day finally overwhelming her.

Her exclamation echoed for a few moments before silence returned, save for the ticking of the distant clock. When Lilith next spoke, it was in a tone that made the hairs stand up on the back of Eve's neck. "On the subject of being cruel to Hazuki-chan, what *exactly* were you doing when you suggested that boon?"

"What do you mean?" Eve asked quietly. "She seemed happy for the chance to see her friend again, didn't she?"

"I'm talking about the *first* suggestion," Lilith said in a low voice.

Eve's earlier anger fled from her, leaving only a familiar shame in its wake. Lilith already knew.

"You know something, Eve?" Lilith said then, almost conversationally, "I've had to forgive you for a great many things over our time together. You know: ten thousand years of loneliness, spreading *Souma* across creation like some kind of social disease, that sort of thing. And I've done so, for no other reason than because I love you."

"I know," Eve whispered. "Even as I love you."

"That being said," Lilith went on, "if you should ever hurt Hazuki-chan like that again? I… will… *never…* forgive you."

Eve took a long breath, then turned once more to face her wife and sister and lover. "If I ever hurt Hazuki-chan like that again," she whispered, "I would beg you *not* to forgive me."

Next: Homecoming

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Today marks four years since the first chapter of Red Bows hit FFN. I am deeply grateful to everyone for reading, even as my update schedule has stretched interminably at times, and I am especially thankful to those who have been here since the

beginning. Thank you all for taking the time to share the storytelling experience with me: without you, I'd just be throwing words into a vacuum.

Meanwhile, hope to see you at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook. Cheers!

Homecoming

Come on home

The team you're hitched to has a mind of its own

But it's just the forces of your past you've fought before

Come back here and shut the door

I'm stacking sandbags against the river of your troubles

-Indigo Girls

.

How does your light shine

In the halls of Shambala

-Three Dog Night

Part 17: Homecoming

Elsewhere…

With a slow, relentless march like that of the turning seasons, the woman made her way down from the jagged, snowy peaks and into the green valley below. Her steps were heavy, yet tireless, holding the same pace even as she set foot in the endless soft grasses and woodlands at this place on top of the world. Before long, the snow clinging to her furs had fallen away, leaving her free to pull back the hood of her cloak and allow the sun to melt the ice from her rose-colored hair. Over her left shoulder she carried the legendary

weapon Heaven Piercer, its many blades worn from use and its single inset red gem gleaming dully in the sunlight.

Finally, after walking some distance into the valley, the woman stopped, for there was a man standing before her.

The man was bare of foot, with sun-darkened skin and a head shorn bald. He was dressed only in a simple white robe, and carried no weapon to match her own. His eyes were deep and dark and older than time, and his smile was wide and genuine as the woman brought her gaze up to meet his.

"You have come far, traveler," said the man in a deep, resonant voice. "What do you seek here, in this place at the top of the world?"

The woman spoke, and her voice was like torn fabric. "Is this the place of which the legends speak?"

"Perhaps," the man replied, his smile deepening. "Tell me, child: what did you see as you came down from the mountains?"

"I saw eight green valleys laid out as the petals of a lotus, separated by mountains and rivers, with a ninth valley at their center, like the seed-heart of the flower. It was just as the legends described."

"Indeed," the man nodded.

"Then have I found Shambhala?" the woman asked bluntly.

"Perhaps," the man said again. "But first, lady of war, tell me more of what you see. Look around you. Do you see villages filled with the citizens of the sacred nation, practicing the *Kalachakra* and living out each peaceful day as a step closer to the Buddha? Do you hear the songs of the people, and the laughter of children? Or do you instead see the burning husks of war-torn homes, the fallow fields, and the bodies of the slain, and do you hear the wails of the dying and the cries of the damned?"

The woman looked slowly from one side to the other. "I see virgin forest, untouched by humans, and trees heavy with fruit. I see animals: predators that hunt only what they need, and prey that do not fear the coming of claw and fang because they know that they will always be reborn even as they give life to another. I hear the songs of birds, and the laughing voices I hear are those of the wind through the branches and the river over the rocks."

"Then tell me what you see in the river, Flying General," the man continued. "Do you see the flowing nectar of the gods, or do you see the way choked with pus and blood that will slake no thirst, not even that of the blade you still carry?"

The woman turned her dulled eyes toward the river in question. "I see the purest water giving life to the forest. I see a refuge for the many fish, a nourishment for the animals, and a deep, cleansing purity spreading to the roots of the trees."

"And what of the valley in the heart of the lotus?" the man asked then. "Do you see the great city of Kapala, its buildings wrought of precious stones and metals, with the largest palace of all being that of the great King of Shambhala? Do you see Jamba, the river of gold, and the northern peaks carved with images of the ten *Bodhisattva* ? Or do you see nothing more than the desolation of a plundered land, sacked and looted, stripped bare by war and conquest? Do you see the river overflowing with the bloated corpses of the dead, and the faces of the *Bodhisattva* filled only with pity for these, the bitter spoils of war?"

The woman cast her gaze toward the higher mountains at the center of the eight valleys. "I see mighty peaks covered with snow that has never known the footprints of man or beast. I see the snow feeding lakes and rivers, whose children in turn feed the eight valleys below. I see mighty evergreens that all but pierce the sky: trees almost as old as the world itself. I see a pure land, knowing only the bounty of nature."

The man looked at the woman for a long time, then asked one last question. "Ryofu Hōsen, why do you seek Shambhala?"

The woman once more locked gazes with the man, but this time the dullness had faded from her eyes, and they now seemed to be shining from within with a singular purpose. "I have a promise to keep… to someone who loved me."

"I see," the man nodded slowly. "Then keep that promise, my child. You are welcome here."

The woman nodded in reply, then carefully set her weapon down on the grass. She unbundled a large travel-pack, set it to the other side, and then knelt beside it. From within she took a one-handed spade and a small, lumpy bag. She then looked to the sky as though judging the position of the sun, nodded to herself, and walked thirty long paces to the north, even as the man watched. Here, she knelt and began to dig.

After she had dug for a while, the woman reached into her bag and pulled out a smaller sack, from which she took the seed-cone of an evergreen tree. She lay a single seed in the hole she had dug, then placed the cone back in its sack and covered the seed with the loose earth from her digging. When the hole was covered once more, she lay one hand over the spot and whispered a single word: " *Yue."*

Once this was said, the woman stood once more, then took several long steps to the east and slightly south. Here, she knelt and repeated her earlier actions: she dug a hole, then reached into her bag for a second small sack which contained a second seed-cone. Again, she placed a single seed, covered it once more, laid her hand over the softly patted earth and whispered a single word: " *Ei."*

The woman continued in this fashion for some time, digging holes, unwrapping seed cones and planting single seeds, following each with a whispered word - " *Shia"* - " *Sei"* - " *Aisha"* - and so on until she had planted twelve seeds from twelve cones in a perfect circle.

Lastly, the woman returned to the spot at which she had been standing during her conversation with the man, and here again she began to dig. Once the hole was good and deep, she removed another bag, this one larger than the others, and from it she withdrew not only a seed cone, but also a small urn. After silently holding the ceramic pot in her hands for a few moments, she opened it, and slowly poured its contents - ashes - into the hole. She then mixed the ashes with some of the earth she had tilled, and once more placed a single seed in the hole before covering it the rest of the way. Her hand lingered on the spot for a long time before she spoke again, and this time her voice was quieter still. " *Nenene."*

For a long time, the man looked down at the visitor to this land, not wishing to disturb her contemplation. At last, though, he spoke. "And what will you do now, my child?"

"Now," the woman whispered, "I will wait."

The return to Astraea Hill after the business with the undead involved no fanfare, no cheering crowds, and not even a handful of shocked friends to have to explain everything to. It was merely four schoolgirls getting back to being schoolgirls after another chance at saving creation from peril. Tamao still had a paper to finish, Chikaru still had to do "a tiny bit more preparation" for her chosen festival performance, Hazuki still needed to finish some reading she'd let fall behind, and Kaname still had to keep her date for (what she hoped would be) a romantic bath and massage with Momomi. There wasn't even a dragon corpse to get rid of: they returned as if nothing at all had changed, because nothing had.

Nonetheless, Hazuki was having a bit of difficulty re-adjusting to school life after her most recent jaunts to two different worlds, with all the physical stresses and emotional wrenches those trips had entailed. While she would certainly do it all again if it meant helping Eve, she was truly beginning to wonder just how stable her life as a student actually was. Maybe an ordinary life with its ordinary struggles was out of her reach after all.

"Hazuki-san, a moment?"

Hazuki paused at the sound of this familiar voice, and turned to see Momomi approaching her from further down the dormitory hall. "President Kiyashiki-sama," she bowed politely.

Momomi gave her a friendly enough smile in reply, though to Hazuki's eyes she looked exhausted. "I was hoping for the chance to speak with you soon," the Spica president said. "There's something I've been considering asking you, and… when I saw you just now, I thought that this would be as good a time as any. Do you have a moment?"

"Of course, Kiyashiki-sama," Hazuki smiled in reply, as the two made their way off to one side in order to get out of traffic, eventually standing to one corner of the wide landing of the ornate central staircase.

"As I'm sure you know by now," Momomi began, "during the previous academic year, an election was held to choose a new Étoile to replace the departing Hanazono-sama. By winning the Étoile-sen, Ōtori-sama and Konohana-sama brought the position back to St. Spica, and did our institution a great honor."

"Understood," Hazuki nodded, wondering where this might be leading.

"As I'm sure you *also* know, Ōtori-sama will graduate this year," Momomi went on. "What is not as commonly known, however, and I must ask your confidence in this matter, is that Konohana-sama has elected to step down rather than to serve as Étoile alone."

"So there will be another Étoile-sen this year?" Hazuki asked.

"By the end of the fall term, yes," Momomi nodded. "It would be a great honor if St. Spica could keep the Étoile position for another year, and… for that reason, I was wondering if you might be willing to put your name in for consideration?"

Hazuki blinked a few times in sheer disbelief. "You want… me? To run for Étoile?"

"I'd like you to consider it."

"But… why me?"

Momomi looked at her appraisingly. "To be brutally honest, Hazuki-san, the student body tends to have a short attention span, and you've been one of the most notable stories within these halls recently. Mind you, not all of the stories have been *good*, at least at first, but you've become a bit of a celebrity lately with your self-defense exercises and naginata team." Momomi then smiled a little awkwardly. "Plus, you recently proved you can dance."

"What does dancing have to do with being Étoile?" Hazuki asked, bewilderedly.

"Entirely too much, to be honest," Momomi said with a sardonic expression. "It's a shame you didn't get a role in the play, though I wonder if maybe you could… *convince* Chikaru-san to give you extra consideration?" She said this with an almost painfully exaggerated waggling of her eyebrows, and Hazuki was suddenly struck by how utterly strained Momomi looked in her efforts to be chummy.

"Chikaru-sama had valid reasons for not giving me a role," Hazuki said in reply. "I'll be quite content with being in the chorus."

"Well, if it comes to that, you could always take *my* role," Momomi shrugged. "I've got nothing left to prove to this school, and if it would help *you*…"

"I couldn't possibly, Kiyashiki-sama," Hazuki bowed. "Aside from which, I have my own methods for proving my worth to St. Spica."

"I suppose you do," Momomi said, again giving her that appraising look. "Regardless of that, then, will you consider my request?"

"I'll… have to look into it before I can say yes," Hazuki nodded. "Perhaps I should speak with Konohana-sama about it, and get her advice?"

"That would be a good starting point," Momomi agreed. "And… while you're at it, maybe you could convince her to… be your partner?"

Hazuki's eyes went wide. "Hikari-sama?" she asked. "My… partner?"

Momomi made a sour face. "I'm sure you've heard all the stories about how the Étoile partners always have to be romantically involved, and yes, the last two couples have been just that, but there's no reason it *has to* be that way. Knowing that a no-nonsense hard worker like you would be holding the position with her might be enough to convince Konohana-sama to stand again. She's quite beloved as Étoile, and between that and your own celebrity, I don't think Miator or Lulim could possibly field a better pair of candidates."

"I see," Hazuki nodded. It was plain enough that retaining the position was Momomi's prime concern, even to the point that she would use a former "enemy" in her attempts to secure it. None of that made the conversation any less surreal, however.

"I would appreciate it if you would at least consider it, then, Hazuki-san," Momomi said with a small bow. "We do not submit candidates until after the Cultural Festival, so you have plenty of time to think it over, but please let me know when you've decided."

"I will, Kiyashiki-sama," Hazuki replied, giving a slightly deeper bow. "Thank you for considering me."

Momomi turned to go, but before she could get too far, Hazuki called out to her. "Kiyashiki-sama?"

"Yes?" Momomi asked, turning back to the taller girl.

"We haven't seen you at *Ka*… er, at naginata practice for a few weeks now," Hazuki told her. "We'll be entering into our first

tournament soon. Should I pencil your name in?"

Momomi stared at her, and a strange, unfamiliar expression crossed her face before it hardened into a smile that managed to be both apologetic and haughty. "Thank you, but no. I know spots are limited, and there's no need to take up a space for me. Life has been… incredibly busy for me lately, Hazuki-san. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Hazuki bowed. "I hope things ease up for you soon."

"Not much chance of that, I'm afraid," Momomi snorted. "Good day, Hazuki-san."

Hazuki watched her go, taking note of the stiffness of her gait. Along with exhausted, she also looked incredibly stressed, and Hazuki could not help but wonder what might be happening behind the scenes.

Whatever it was, hopefully Kaname would be able to help her through it.

Tamao would never have guessed that her first lesson on the mechanics of the universe would so heavily involve the repeated flipping of a hundred-yen coin, and yet here she was, sitting out by the lake with Lilith as the Keeper once again let the coin fly, turning end-over-end in midair.

"Heads," she whispered. A fraction of a second later, the coin landed on the relatively flat surface of their picnic blanket, and she opened her eyes and looked down to see the carved representation of a phoenix shining in the late afternoon sun.

"Heads it is," Lilith smiled. "Very good, Tamao-chan. That's ten in a row."

"Why do they call it 'Heads or Tails,' anyway?" Tamao asked. "The phoenix has both."

"Well, a lot of your world's nations mint their coins with someone's head on one side," Lilith shrugged. "Not my fault that Japan doesn't do the same. A lot of people will flip a coin to make a spontaneous decision, or to decide who has to, say, pay a bill or do a chore."

"Why not just play janken?"

"Janken's fine for a lot of things, sure," Lilith nodded as she picked up the coin and turned it in her palm, "but that doesn't have the same element of randomness, since there are two sets of conscious thought going into the outcome. A coin flip is one of the closest things to random that I can use for the purpose of this lesson, but even that's not *completely* up to chance. The outcome is determined by any number of elements the moment it hits the air. How hard was it flipped? What kind of rotation did it get? What external factors might influence its movement in midair?" She closed her fingers over the coin. "But the amount of control it would take to flip one *just right* to be able to predict its outcome is not something that you're going to find in a mortal hand, so again, this is going to be as random as it comes."

"We could roll a die," Tamao suggested.

"True, but even with a standard cube you're looking at six outcomes, not two," Lilith chuckled. "Let's get you consistently working with two possible outcomes before we complicate things, shall we? Ready for another?"

"Please," Tamao nodded, closing her eyes and concentrating.

The first part of the lesson had involved simply closing her eyes and opening her metaphysical senses to the world around her. At this point Lilith introduced the coin, and showed Tamao what "Heads" and "Tails" looked like using her *Souma* rather than her eyes. Next, Lilith flipped the coin and asked Tamao after it landed which face had come up, which was simple enough.

The difficulty came when Lilith began asking her to predict which face would land "up" while the coin was still in midair. *Don't just see what a "Heads" or a "Tails" looks like while it's lying there: see what goes into the making of the result. See the subtleties of its motion, and watch how everything dovetails together for the recognized outcome* .

After a few dozen tosses, Tamao had begun to take note of some of those subtleties, and was quickly developing a sense for which set of circumstances led to the phoenix, and which led to the coin's denomination. Eventually, she had correctly "predicted" her tenth in a row, and was feeling quite proud of her progress thus far.

Reaching out with her mind and power, Tamao watched as Lilith balanced the coin on her bent pointer finger, then brought her thumb up to send the disc spinning into the air. As it reached its apex, Tamao smiled as she once again recognized the patterns of motion for what they were. "Tails," she called.

"Good," said Lilith. "Now make it Heads."

At the Keeper's request, Tamao instinctively reached out with her power as the coin began plummeting earthward. The rotation was all wrong for a Heads! If she wanted this one to land phoenix-side-up, it was going to need more spin, but it was coming down so *fast*, and what would be the best way to give it that extra motion, short of hitting it with the air around it or by causing the surface of the blanket to rise up to meet it sooner than expected, and *it was about to come up Tails unless she could..!*

Tamao's eyes snapped open, and she looked down to see that the coin had come to rest against the blanket.

On its edge .

Eventually, gravity won out, and it fell flat, phoenix-side up.

"Not exactly subtle," Lilith smiled, "but it got the intended result."

Tamao took a few deep breaths. Her heart was pounding against her ribs, and she could feel cold sweat trickling down her face. "That was…" she whispered.

"Quite an effort, wasn't it?" Lilith nodded.

"All that for flipping a coin to the other side?" Tamao asked.

"Precisely," Lilith replied, picking up the coin and holding it between thumb and forefinger. "Your power as a Maker has incredible potential, but it takes practice, it takes knowledge, and above all it takes a sense of perspective. That's why I started with this. Think of how much goes into this simple A or B outcome, and then consider that it's just the two of us here, sitting by a lake and flipping a coin. Whether this coin comes up Heads or Tails with only us here to witness it? That's an outcome that has no appreciable effect on the rest of the world, and yet it's still *that complex*, and *that difficult to change* .

"Now," Lilith smiled, bringing her fathomless eyes to bear on Tamao's, "picture the amount of control it must take to make changes in situations with near-infinite outcomes, where the difference between one and another will have a *profound* effect on the future of your world. *That's* what it means to be a Maker, Tamao-chan. *That's* the responsibility of having the power you possess."

The Keeper pointed out at the lake. "And it doesn't stop with affecting real-time situations. See those ducks out there? Maybe you want those to be swans instead? Rewrite the patterns of their reality, and you've got swans, but you'd better damned well be mindful of the consequences, and what it will do to the nesting and mating of the local waterfowl. Want those clouds to give us rain? Fine, but you've just forced a change to the weather patterns that could easily have global consequences."

"Could that harm the book itself?" Tamao asked.

Lilith shook her head. "Probably not, though it's certainly possible. Chances are, your *world* would be flexible enough to absorb the change without any lasting damage to itself." She narrowed her eyes. "Lasting damage to the world's inhabitants, however? That's another story. I can't impress that upon you enough, Tamao-chan: this is serious business. As serious as it gets."

"I understand, Lilith-sama," Tamao nodded.

"I know you do," Lilith said with a quirky grin, holding out the coin for Tamao. "That's why I'm here. You understood enough to ask for help, so you'll get it, but that's enough for the first lesson. Hold onto this for practice, but mind that you don't spend it: this is an old design, and it's pretty rare in your present time."

"I'll take care of it," Tamao smiled, placing the coin into her skirt pocket. "Thank you, Lilith-sama."

"Anything other light I can shed for you before I go?" asked the Keeper.

Tamao nodded. "Actually, yes, there was something I was wondering about, but it's not about Maker *Souma* . I was wondering about Kaori-san."

To Tamao's surprise, Lilith's face grew noticeably colder. "What about her?"

"I was just curious," Tamao went on. "Now that the Library is safe again, will you be finding her another world to live in soon?"

"Eventually," Lilith said, her voice becoming similarly frosty. "But that's no business of yours, Tamao-chan."

"Oh," Tamao blinked, wondering what she had done to upset the Keeper so. "I'm sorry, Lilith-sama. I was just concerned for her, that's all."

"Yeah, and so were Hazuki-chan, Chikaru-chan, and even Kaname-chan," Lilith frowned. "Seriously, Tamao-chan, why is she so important to all of you, anyway? She's *not* the Kaori from your world, and you *don't* know her as well as you think you do."

"Um… no, I suppose I don't," Tamao said with a frown of her own. "But to be perfectly honest, Lilith-sama, she was the main reason why I asked you for the boon I did."

Lilith gave her apprentice a look of real surprise. "She was? How so?"

"It was when she told us what it was like to be pulled out of her world," Tamao explained. "The way that she discovered just how much of the world she touched, and what it felt like to be removed from it all. The words she used to describe it… they *haunted* me, Lilith-sama, and it's been on my mind ever since. She's the one who really made me stop and think about how frightening Maker *Souma* could be. I always knew it was something to be careful with, and to respect, but Kaori-san was the one who truly showed me what I needed to do."

"Was she, now?" Lilith asked quietly.

"She was," Tamao nodded in reply. "And also…"

"Hmm?" Lilith asked when Tamao trailed off.

Tamao thought hard about whether or not she wanted to say this, but then remembered that she was talking to the Maker goddess. If she could not say this to Lilith, who *could* she say it to, really? "I know she's not the Kaori-sama from our world, but I never had a chance to thank my world's Kaori-sama for everything she did for me, and I suppose wanting to help *this* Kaori-san is my way of saying thank you." She paused, then took a breath before saying the rest. "I wonder sometimes if I would be alive today if not for her."

"Go on," Lilith whispered.

"I was… very lonely when I came to this school, Lilith-sama," Tamao said in a hushed voice. "It was a very dark time for me, and as one friendless day dragged into the next, I started to wonder if it would ever end. I started having… thoughts. Disturbing thoughts. Thoughts of how the world would never miss me if I just disappeared. Naoko-sama… or rather, Eve-sama… she always knew how to reassure me, but then… one day she was gone."

She paused for a moment. It was never easy to dredge up those memories, even as happy as her life had become. "The loneliness came back, then, more than ever. But then I thought of Kaori-sama, who faced every day bravely, even knowing that she would never live to graduate, and after she died… I remember thinking that it would be an insult to her memory if I gave up on my own life."

Lilith said nothing in reply, so Tamao continued. "Hearing the other Kaori-san tell us what it was like to discover just how many lives she had touched… that just confirmed it, all this time later. I used to wonder who would ever notice if I disappeared, and I feel very lucky now that I never followed through with those thoughts. So I suppose you could say that both Sakuragi Kaoris have been an inspiration to me."

Tamao had been looking out at the lake as she had said this, unable to meet the Keeper's eyes as she divulged these secrets. At last, though, she looked back to her teacher, only to be shocked by what she saw: Lilith's face had lost all color, and her eyes were vacant and staring. "Lilith-sama?"

"Yes, I'm here," Lilith said briskly, making an obvious effort to shake it off, but the distant look remained in her eyes as she stood up. "I… need to go, Tamao-chan. Thank you for trusting me with that."

"Of course," Tamao replied, rising to her feet as well. "Thank you for the visit, Lilith-sama. It was very educational."

Lilith nodded, the faraway look never quite leaving her eyes. "Yes… I suppose it was."

After her late afternoon run, Kaname made her way back to the gymnasium complex for a shower and change before dinner. Upon approaching the building, though, she noticed a familiar silhouette up on the roof.

Up there again, eh?

She showered quickly, got dressed, then made her way up to the roof, where Hazuki was still standing, arms crossed, looking off toward the setting sun. "Nice day for a brood, isn't it?" she asked as she stepped up next to the other girl.

"Yeah, yeah," Hazuki groused, but it didn't sound like her heart was really in it.

"Seriously, though, what's on your mind?" Kaname asked. "I know *you* don't necessarily need a reason to be all stoic like this, but this looks serious, even for you."

Hazuki shook her head slowly, and while she did not laugh, she at least cracked a tiny smile. It quickly faded, though. "I… still just can't believe she's gone."

"Your friend Chou'un?" Kaname asked.

"Yeah," Hazuki nodded.

For a while, the only sounds were the wind, the birds, and a few distant voices. Kaname stared out into the distance for a moment as well, then spoke. "I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"Kaname…"

"Seriously. Unapologetically gay, a monster on the battlefield and a wicked sense of humor? She sounds like my kind of party."

"That isn't funny, Kaname," Hazuki said darkly.

"Who's trying to be funny?" Kaname shrugged. "You got to see her again after she died, remember? Who's to say I won't get the chance to do the same, or that *you* won't get *another* chance?"

"Yeah, I got to see her," Hazuki nodded. "All it took was doing something to put the goddesses in my debt first."

"True," Kaname agreed. "So the way things have been going, you'll probably have another shot in, oh…" Kaname was not wearing a wristwatch, but she made a show of pretending to look at one. "About two weeks? Three, tops?"

There was a long pause, and then Hazuki snorted with laughter. "You know… that's a really good point."

"Only kind I ever have. Come on, let's go get some dinner."

Kaname gave Hazuki a hearty pat on the shoulder, and the two *yami* turned and headed back toward the stairs just before the sun finally touched the tree-lined horizon.

Next: Intermezzo

Intermezzo

Once there were wars fought over spice and salt

And the stick of gold became the standard measure

Nothing much has changed in this modern age

And it won't until the pain's not worth the pleasure

And for all we've left undone, there's another war to come

-Indigo Girls

Part 18: Intermezzo

Elsewhere…

It was to have been their moment of triumph: the day that Toghon Temur Khan would be taken once and for all, breaking the back of the Mongol people and leaving the rule of Shu Genshō, the Hongwu Emperor, undisputed before men and gods.

Having driven the Mongols from their southern capital of Khanbaliq, the Emperor had sent two of his finest generals north to sack the summer capital of Shangdu, and to return with the either the captured Khan, or simply his head: either would suffice. It was to be a battle told in song and story for generations to come.

And yet, only eerie silence greeted the revered Jōgūshun Hakujin as his army descended upon Shangdu. The once great city, home to some hundred thousand people, was deserted. No standing army for his soldiers to destroy, no fortified walls to bombard with fire and explosives, and worst of all, no Khan to skewer at the end of his spear.

Frustrated that the wily Mongol could give him the slip yet again, Hakujin seethed in his tent as the army made camp outside the city walls. Soon, he was joined by Li Bunchū, commander of the advance forces.

"Have your scouts found anything?" Hakujin growled.

"The city is all but deserted, General," Bunchū informed him. "There are obvious signs of evacuation to the north, deeper into Yuan territory. However…"

"So Toghun Temur Khan is every bit the coward that we believed," said Hakujin. "How surprising that he did not leave his people behind as he fled to save his own skin."

"I have men scouring the city and the palace of the Khan now, but…"

"Our course is clear," Hakujin interrupted. "There is to be no capital for the Khan to return to. We will put the city to the torch once we have taken what plunder we can find. Let the blackened bones of Shangdu serve as a warning for…"

"General," Bunchū said insistently, "there is one yet remaining in the palace gardens. Four of my men have already been killed."

Hakujin arched an eyebrow at the other man. "One of the Khan's personal guard remained, then?"

"No, General. At least, she was not dressed as such."

"She?" Hakujin scowled. "A *woman* killed four of your men?"

"The Mongol women are famous for their ferocity, General."

Hakujin let out a bark of derisive laughter. "Did she stab them with a sewing needle, perhaps?"

"I am told that she… killed them with her bare hands, General."

This declaration gave Hakujin pause. Bunchū was a no-nonsense soldier, not prone to exaggeration or whimsy. If he said that a woman in the palace gardens had killed four of his men, then killed them she had.

"Well, then," Hakujin chuckled, "let us pay her a visit, and perhaps we can discover if the *other* legends of Mongol women are true as well."

Accompanied by their personal guard of a half-dozen elite soldiers each, the two commanders ventured into the deserted city, eventually reaching the outer walls of the palace, encompassing what could only be the gardens. The tops of majestic trees swayed lazily in the breeze beyond, but still the unnatural silence remained: not even the sounds of birds could be discerned over the whisper of the wind.

Here, they also encountered the bodies of two of their soldiers, lying at the base of the sheer stone edifice. Neither showed any obvious blade or spear wounds, but their bodies were bent and broken in a great many places where no joints existed. Also, for reasons the general could not even begin to guess, both were soaking wet.

Hakujin studied the mangled bodies carefully. A woman had done this?

" *General!"* Bunchū shouted, and Hakujin found himself roughly shoved to one side. Before he could even right himself, there was a horrible thudding noise as a third body landed atop the other two.

Hakujin turned wide eyes on the other commander. "How did.."

"It… came from over the wall, General." Bunchū said quietly, looking upward. Hakujin followed his gaze, but there was no one there who could have dropped the hapless soldier onto them like this.

Saying no more for the time being, the small force circled the wall's exterior until they found an ornate wooden double-gate, outside of

which several soldiers were milling about nervously. Upon noticing their approaching generals, they ceased their motion and stood straight, though the looks on their faces were evidence enough of their fear. "General," their apparent leader said.

"Beyond this gate we may find the gardens, yes?" said Hakujin, stepping very close to the soldier who had spoken.

"Yes, General. We broke the lock some time ago. But…"

"Then open it at once," Hakujin demanded.

"But General… she… she was *very* insistent that we not open it again."

Hakujin did not raise his voice, but into it he channeled all the prowess that had given him the name of *Jōgūshun Ten Thousand* . "Who do you fear more, child? The woman beyond those gates? Or me?"

The young soldier gave his answer by waving two of his fellows over to help him pull the giant wooden doors open. Followed closely by their guards, the two generals strode through, into the legendary gardens of Shangdu.

Even as a hardened veteran of many wars, even as a peerless fighter who had seen countless men die at the end of his spear, Hakujin could not help but appreciate the idyllic scene before him. Dominated by a circle of evergreens in its center, the fabled gardens were a lush paradise in the heart of the city. A natural stream ran through the center of the grounds, feeding beds of exotic flowers and fruit trees the likes of which he had never seen. Ornate statuary of beasts wild and legendary stalked in the lush, soft grasses beneath their feet. Here and there, a fountain bubbled merrily, or a set of chimes hanging from a low branch offered its soft, pure tones: sounds which they had not been able to hear from without.

And yet, not so much as a mouse moved as they strode into the walled paradise. No animals, no birds… no life at all.

Presently, what Hakujin had thought to be a piece of the statuary stood.

A woman had been kneeling beside the stream, looking as though she had been washing clothing. As she rose to her feet, she lifted the body of another soldier out of the water, slung it quite easily over her shoulder, and then began to slowly trudge across the grass. Upon reaching the base of the outer wall, she raised the sodden corpse over her head, crouched slightly, then with a mighty heave flung it up and over, no doubt to land on the other side next to its three fellows.

Hakujin was momentarily taken aback by this obvious show of strength - the wall was easily as tall as four men - and he beckoned to one of his elites: the finest crossbow-wielder in his forces. "Get onto that wall and be ready to fire upon my signal."

As his archer hurried off, Hakujin took a few steps forward. "So!" he called. "Are these truly the gardens of Shangdu, the pride of Kublai Khan?"

The woman, who had been walking back toward the stream, stopped at the sound of his voice, and slowly turned to face him.

She was not much to look at, truth be told. She was dressed in dirt-stained, colorless clothing befitting a household servant, or a menial worker. The only color in her otherwise drab appearance came from her hair and her eyes, both of which were a most unusual shade of reddish-pink, matching some of the flowers on display. Two thin locks of that hair rose from her brow and hung suspended above the rest, like the crest of a bird.

"These are the gardens of Shangdu," the woman said in a rough voice that seemed quite unaccustomed to speaking.

"So you say," Hakujin drawled. "But then where are the Khan's many concubines, each more lovely than the last?"

"With the Khan."

"The exotic wild animals native to distant lands, wandering the grounds among us as tame as dogs?"

"I sent them away."

"The fabled pleasure-dome, and its delights surpassing any in this world?"

"Folded up and taken."

Hakujin chuckled. "And who are you, child? A forgotten concubine?"

The woman blinked at him. "I am the Khan's groundskeeper."

From the corner of his eye, Hakujin saw that his archer had managed to scale the wall, and was getting into position. "Young woman, do you know who I am?"

"You are the commander of the Ming armies."

"If you know that, then surely you must know that the Khan has abandoned his city, his palace, and his gardens."

"You are welcome to the city and the palace," the woman said in a conversational tone. "It is your right as the conquering army. Do with them as you will. But I will not allow you to touch my trees."

Hakujin narrowed his eyes at this impudent girl. " *You*… will not *allow* it?"

"I will not. You see, these gardens do not belong to the Khan. They belong to me."

With a boisterous laugh, Hakujin slammed the butt of his spear into the earth. "I like your spirit, girl! Indeed, the Mongol women are an amazing breed. What is your name, that I may tell the Khan of your bravery before I take his head?"

The Mongol stared directly into his eyes. "I am Ryofu Hōsen."

Several of the men behind him gasped, and Hakujin felt his blood boil at the blasphemy he had just heard. "You dare..?" he growled. "Who are you to profane the name of the Flying General?"

"I cannot profane a name that belongs to me," the woman said evenly.

Few things infuriated Hakujin more than those who held fast to the ridiculous notion that the great generals of the Three Kingdoms had actually been women. But for this peasant to actually use the name of one of the greatest men to have walked the land? It was an insult to be answered with a swift death. "May the soul of the Flying General torment you in Hell, Mongol bitch!" he spat, then made a cutting motion in the air with his left hand.

From his place on the garden wall, Hakujin's archer fired his crossbow straight and true, but in an impossible blur of motion, the groundskeeper leaned back, plucked from midair the arrow which would have split her throat, spun in a full circle and hurled the missile back at the one who had loosed it. The archer did not even have time to cry out before his own arrow pierced his skull, trailing a spray of blood as it emerged from the back of his helmet and continued its flight.

Hakujin watched, agape, as the archer tumbled back and fell from the wall. A split second passed in which he realized that he had to act now or lose his command. " *Kill her!"* he bellowed to his remaining soldiers.

The troops quickly fell upon her, but she wrenched the spear from the first one's grasp, then whirled and drove the blunt end of it into

his sternum, with the sickening sound of splintering ribs. A fierce kick snapped the spear of one while the shaft of her stolen weapon did the same to the neck of another. Each blow from the Mongol's whirlwind attack was punctuated by the sounds of breaking bones and rended armor. Swords were caught barehanded and flung away, spinning up and over the garden walls. At one point, the woman even grabbed one of the fallen men by his legs and swung him in an arc, using his body to bludgeon his comrades.

Within scant moments, eleven men lay dead at the Mongol's feet, limbs, necks and bodies shattered by her relentless assault, leaving only Hakujin and Bunchū standing.

"Get out of my garden," the woman said quietly. "Those who would shed blood are not welcome here." She then turned her back on them and stepped away, toward the circle of evergreens.

"General..?" Bunchū asked.

"Stay back," Hakujin said quietly. "This fight is mine."

In all his years since joining the Red Turban Rebellion, serving under Shu Genshō and ridding his homeland of the damned Mongols, Hakujin had never once experienced fear. He often boasted that he did not know what it felt like, and his reputation both as a warrior and as a general attested to this.

Thus, as he strode after the Mongol woman, he buried this very new and chilling sensation under waves of hot fury. " *You there!"* he bellowed. " *Do not turn your back to me, woman! Face me! I am Jōgūshun Hakujin, known throughout the land as Jōgūshun Ten Thousand! I will be your death!"*

Before his words had even echoed away, there came the shrill, piercing cry of a bird of prey, and from the evergreens flew a huge, majestic falcon, holding what could only be a weapon in its talons. As the bird swooped down, the groundskeeper leaped to meet it in mid-

air, taking the polearm from its grip and somersaulting back to the ground, landing in a combat stance before Hakujin.

The late sun reflected angrily from a huge red gem set between the multiple spiked and serrated blades of the woman's naginata, and for just an instant, Hakujin froze. He had seen images of this weapon before while studying the great generals of the Three Kingdoms. Impossible as it was, he knew without a doubt that he was gazing upon Heaven Piercer.

The blade of the Flying General.

"I am Ryofu Hōsen," the woman replied, her voice as quiet as ever, "and you will not touch my trees."

Hearing that name once again spoken by this woman's lips, Hakujin let the anger take him and charged. His spear was deflected with a counter-blow that left his hands stinging, but he tightened his grip and swung again, and again. Each time, though, his blow was swatted away by the woman, who was wielding the great blade as though it were weightless. Worse, the Mongol's face bore no sense of struggle: if anything, she looked dispassionate, and even bored.

She was *mocking* him! Summoning every seething drop of fury from the depths of his warrior's soul, Hakujin let out a mighty cry and swiped with his spear-tip, bringing it across the woman's hands and sending a single gob of blood arcing away from the tiniest of wounds.

In a flash, the Mongol made a sweeping kick to the side of the general's head, sending him momentarily reeling. After he shook the stars from his vision, he looked back to see the woman make a tumbling lunge to one side, grabbing something out of the air and rolling back to her feet. Hakujin stood his ground, momentarily puzzled at what she might be up to, but then the woman opened her hand, and he saw a smear of red across her palm.

She had caught the blood from her wound before it could hit the ground.

After staring at her hand for a moment more, the woman wiped it against her other sleeve, and then turned back to the Ming general. Her face, which moments ago had been empty of emotion, was now etched with quiet fury.

What came next was a flurry of attacks so swift that Hakujin felt as though he were moving through a quagmire as he struggled to block blow after blow. Even though he quickly realized that she could likely kill him at any time, she did not: each thrust from Heaven Piercer instead clipped a seam of cloth, or a strap of his armor. One swipe sent his helmet flying, with the very tip of the largest blade just grazing his forehead, but likely not hard enough even to leave a mark.

She was literally undressing him as he furiously backpedaled. Within twenty seconds he was stripped of all armor, and at this point she casually tossed her horrific blade aside, plucked his spear from his grasp with one hand and hurled it away, then closed with him and drove her straightened fingers into his midsection, just below his ribs.

The pain was unlike anything the great general had ever experienced: though her fingers did not pierce his skin, he felt as though he had been impaled by a spearhead of fire and acid, eating away at his muscles and organs. Robbed momentarily of the ability to breathe, he collapsed to the soft grasses, then was quickly rolled onto his back by the Mongol, who brought her face within inches of his.

"In all the days since I planted these gardens for Kublai Khan," she said in the same quiet voice with which she had first greeted him, "blood has *never* been spilled within these walls."

At that moment, Bunchū rushed up from her blind side in an attempt to catch her unawares, but without looking she deflected his spearhead away with the back of her hand, then lashed out at him

with one grubby boot, sending him flying backward with a grunt of surprise and pain.

The woman then leaned in closer still, so that their noses were almost touching. Her eyes were no longer the color of roses, but of the blood shed by every warrior who had fallen at the hands of the Flying General. "Get out of my garden," she repeated. "You are not welcome here."

She rose to her feet, then slowly walked away, leaving Hakujin broken and unable to move. Rather than finish him off, she simply left him there, as though he were no longer worthy of her attention.

As the woman gathered up two of the fallen soldiers and carried them off toward the stream, Bunchū limped to Hakujin's side, both of their spears in hand. "General," he whispered, "can you stand?"

In truth, Hakujin could barely breathe. Sensing this, Bunchū hooked his unencumbered arm around the general's shoulders and began to clumsily drag him toward the gate. Every move was agony for the wounded Hakujin, and it was all he could do to refrain for crying out as he was pulled to safety.

Soon they were outside the garden walls, and Hakujin found himself surrounded by the soldiers who had opened the gate. Every one of them was staring at him with unmasked horror. Every one of them had seen his defeat.

No, to say it had been a defeat implied that there had actually been a contest, and this had been anything but. Jōgūshun Ten Thousand, so named for his unparalleled strength in battle, had been brutally humiliated.

By a *woman* .

After a few minutes, the general was able to stand, though he could not walk without leaning heavily against Bunchū. His insides were

still on fire, and he wondered how much damage the bloodless attack had done to him.

Bunchū ordered his soldiers to close the gate, and told them to say nothing of what had transpired here, under pain of death. Hakujin knew better, though: no secret shame was safe within an army, and soon everyone would be whispering of their commander's failure.

The trip back to their encampment took a small eternity, but at last Hakujin was brought to his tent and laid out on his sleeping mat. Bunchū quickly sent for healers, though with every barked order he winced with obvious pain.

"You are hurt as well?" Hakujin asked once the two were alone.

"Several of my ribs are broken, General," the advance commander grimaced.

"Have the healers tend to you first, then. I doubt they will be able to save me."

"Please do not say such things, Tsubame-dono."

Hakujin almost smiled at this. It had been a long time since his old comrade had used this name for him. "Very well… Shiben. Then will you be able to carry out my orders while they attend me?"

"Of course."

With a tiny nod, Hakujin took a breath and let the image of that woman's face fill his mind's eye. "Pull all of our men from the city, then have our engineers rain fire upon it. I want every catapult loaded with as much as it can carry: the powder bombs, the poison bombs, but most of all the ten-thousand-fire bombs. Coordinate the attack so that they fire their first volley together, then each is to reload and repeat fire as quickly as possible."

"It will be done, General."

"Most importantly," Hakujin continued, reaching out to grasp the other man's forearm, "for the first volley, aim every catapult at those gardens. Leave not so much as a blade of grass. Now go, and carry out my orders."

Bunchū nodded and rose to leave, but before he did, he looked back at the wounded general. "Tsubame-dono," he said quietly, "that woman… do you think she… that she *could* have been..?"

"The Flying General died after the Battle of Xiapi," Hakujin snarled. "Whoever that woman is, let our weapons melt the flesh from her bones."

With one last nod, Bunchū left the general's tent, just as a small cluster of healers arrived with bandages, salves and drugs.

As he lay there and let them do their work, Hakujin found himself pondering the question that Bunchū had been unable to finish. Surely the very idea was madness. Ryofu Hōsen was long dead, existing only in statue and shrine alongside the other venerated men of his time. This Mongol woman may have been a demon made flesh, but she was no Flying General.

And yet…

Hakujin dismissed the thought as the drugs began to take effect. Whoever she was, she would be ashes soon, along with her precious trees.

The atmosphere in the rehearsal hall was deliciously upbeat, Chikaru found: a mix of anticipation, cheer, and even a little bit of low-grade anxiety from those who were new to this sort of thing. A perfect way to begin the process. Once she was satisfied that everyone had arrived, she gathered up several stacks of paper and stepped out before the four rows of chairs. The buzz of conversation slowly settled to a murmur, and then polite silence.

"Well, then," she smiled at the thirty-something students assembled before her. "Welcome to the first cast meeting and rehearsal for the *Ichigo-sha* production of *The Pirates of Penzance* ."

There was a smattering of light applause as Chikaru gave a small bow. "My name is Minamoto Chikaru, Student Council President of the St. Lulim School for Girls, and thus it is my honor and privilege to serve as director of this little endeavor. I'm looking forward to working with each and every one of you, and I'm very grateful to you for your willingness to try something new and different for this year's Cultural Festival."

She began distributing papers to the girls at the end of each row, directing them to each take one and pass the rest down. "The first part of this meeting is entirely housekeeping. I'm passing out a full cast list, as well as a list of members of the crew, along with a full rehearsal schedule. Please check it carefully, as not all of you will be required for each rehearsal: sometimes we will be working with only the chorus, sometimes only the principals, and sometimes only *certain* principals. We're all very busy with school and clubs, so it's very important to us that we not waste your time. If you are called, you *will* be working. However, if you have conflicts that you absolutely cannot get out of, please let me know as soon as possible."

Once the shuffling of papers died down, Chikaru crossed back to center stage. "You will not be seeing much of me for the early practices, as I will largely be working with the St Lulim Chamber Orchestra. However, I will be leaving you in *very* capable hands." She then looked to the back of the room, where her two assistants were standing and waiting their turn. "Sayuri-chan, would you like to introduce yourself first?"

"Thank you, Chikaru-sama," Sayuri bowed to her, then came to take over front and center while Chikaru stepped to the side and began unloading stacks of three-ring binders from the boxes they'd brought along.

Sayuri bowed again to the cast, her brown topknot briefly flopping into her face as it often did. "Good evening, everyone," she said as she straightened up and brushed the errant hair away. "My name is Kaganoi Sayuri, Vice-President of St. Lulim, and I'll be your music director, rehearsal accompanist and chorus-mistress. It is my task and my pleasure to teach you to sing this gem of the Western comic opera tradition.

"President Minamoto-sama is currently passing out your scripts and edited musical scores. Make sure to double-check that you get the one marked with your name, as each one also has a personalized rehearsal disc inside containing recordings of the individual songs. We used synthesizers and Vocaloid software, and each disc has your particular vocal part emphasized for ease of hearing." Sayuri paused and smiled. "By the time we're finished, however, I hope you all sound *far* better than a chorus of Hatsune Mikus."

There was a tittering of laughter, then Sayuri went on. "For any of you who might have heard *The Pirates of Penzance* before, or perhaps went and researched it a bit once you were cast, I should warn you that our production will be quite a bit different than anything you might have encountered. Due to time constraints, several numbers will be cut, and others will be shortened. Also, because we do not have any basses or tenors in our midst, several numbers will be sung in a different key than Sir Arthur Sullivan originally intended. Your scores and recordings have already taken that into account, and President Minamoto-sama has the unenviable task of re-working the orchestrations to match."

"That's okay, Sayuri-chan, I don't sleep much anyway," Chikaru smiled.

There *may* have been a muttered "So I've heard," which *may* have come from the vicinity of a certain Pirate King in the front row, but Sayuri continued on, covering any potential reaction. "Again, we're all very busy at this time of year, and since I know that we're at… *various* levels of music education in this room, we thought it would be best to offer you these so that you may rehearse on your own

during what free time you have. Please, *please* do so. We don't have much rehearsal time together, and the less time we spend on learning the notes, the more time we have to work on nuance and blend and making it into something lovely. Any questions so far?"

No hands went up, so after a few moments of silence, Sayuri again bowed. "On a personal note, this is… something of a dream come true for me, to be able to share this experience with all of you, and with an audience. Thank you for taking this journey with us."

There was another bit of light applause as Sayuri relinquished the stage to her student council cohort, who bowed in turn. "Good evening. My name is Umekouji Ayame, Secretary of St. Lulim, and I'll be the choreographer and assistant director."

Here, finally, came a buzz of actual surprise, and Chikaru noticed Amane, seated in the front row with the rest of the principals, trying very hard not to look aghast, while Hikari instinctively squeezed her partner's hand.

"Now, don't worry," Ayame smiled, her copper-colored eyes twinkling. "While there will be *some* dancing in this show, it won't be anything too challenging, at least for the chorus. As for the principals, we'll be happy to give you *every* opportunity to shine to the best of your ability. Proper shoes will be provided for rehearsal, so that you have the chance to get used to them before we put you in costume."

Chikaru looked over the crowd, picking out familiar faces, starting with Hikari front and center, flanked by Amane and Yaya. The senior Étoile was looking a little green, and Chikaru nodded to herself, realizing that this was likely to be her greatest challenge. For all her confidence astride a horse, for all the veneration she received from her fellow students, Amane was still in many ways a painfully shy woman. Nonetheless, tradition demanded the presence of the Étoile, making this a challenge to be met and conquered.

"What Sayuri-chan said to you about learning the music as quickly as possible so that you can spend more time working on nuance?

That applies here as well. The sooner you are comfortable with your singing and your dialogue, the more time and energy we will be able to devote to making the show *look* as good as it *sounds* ."

Nagisa and Tamao were sitting in identical poses of rapt attention, with Hazuki seated in the row behind them appearing perhaps a little less engaged and a little more puzzled, as though wondering what she had gotten herself into. Chikaru was very glad that Hazuki had chosen to pursue a part in the chorus after all, and hoped that she would enjoy the experience as much as Tamao already seemed to be.

"Back to the subject of costumes, one of the most common problems encountered on stage is that once the costumes are on, you suddenly find yourselves having to re-learn all the blocking and staging that you've committed to memory, simply because you take up more space than you used to. We strongly suggest that along with the shoes we provide, you wear rehearsal clothing that at least approximates your eventual costume. For those of you playing pirates, that means pants or leggings, and long coats. For those of you playing police, that means pants and long-sleeved shirts, but nothing skin-tight. For those of you playing ladies, that means long skirts, the fuller the better: at least as full as a Miator uniform. If you cannot provide your own, we will try to outfit you accordingly."

On the Spica side of things, since it was Momomi sitting next to Kaname rather than someone else, it appeared that the current Spica president was going to stick with it, at least for now. Her level of commitment was at least as much of a concern as were Amane's nerves. Perhaps it would be worth it to have a stealth understudy for the role, just in case…

"I… think that's all I have for you, except to say that if you are unable to reach the director with any questions or concerns, please bring them to me, and if I cannot address them myself, I will forward them as needed." Ayame then turned to her president. "President Minamoto-sama?"

"Thank you, Ayame-chan," Chikaru nodded to the club secretary as she once more stepped out in front of the gathered cast. "Are there any questions before we begin, ladies?"

Again, there were no raised hands, though by the looks on some of the faces before her, Chikaru would be fielding a few once they were no longer all assembled like this.

Time enough for that later. "In that case, they're all yours, Sayuri-chan. We shall begin with the end: the finale of Act II, which is the only section in which the entire cast will be singing together. After that will be a brief introduction to the rest of the show so you can all hear it for yourselves. Starting with the next rehearsal you'll be split up for chorus practice, individual work, and line readings; please check your schedules for details."

Chikaru took a deep breath, looked to each of her assistants in turn, then gave a decisive nod. "My friends… let's make music, shall we?"

Elsewhere…

Fueled by the relentless barrage from the Ming armies, the once magnificent city of Shangdu was now a seething cauldron, with a column of flame rising to all but pierce the clouds above. At the base of this blazing spire, its walls shattered and crumbled, lay the remains of the Khan's palace: its gardens, once a small piece of paradise on Earth, now more closely resembled the depths of Hell, with the blackened skeletons of its trees still visible amidst the fires.

From a nearby hilltop, a lone figure sat and watched, her face betraying no emotion as her home burned beneath her. Beside her, a mighty polearm was planted blade-first into the earth, while a falcon perched on its pommel, scanning the area restlessly.

The bird gave a sudden cry, as if in warning, but the woman knew that she had nothing to fear from the figure who appeared seemingly from nothingness to sit beside her.

For a long while, the only sound was the roar of the burning city, but at last, Lilith spoke. "I'm sorry, Ryofu-chan."

"I could have killed them all," said Ryofu. It was neither a boast, nor an expression of regret: merely a statement of fact.

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because there would be another army. There is always another army. If not these men, then someone else would have come and burned my trees. Generals are no longer content with just killing their enemies."

Lilith looked down at the blasted city as a few more explosions rocked the night. The Ming armies were continuing their bombardment, in spite of there being no one there to kill.

"I'm tired, Lilith," Ryofu said quietly.

"Do you think… you might be ready now?" the goddess asked.

Silence stretched between the two women, and Ryofu's normally impassive face looked somewhat troubled.

"You've kept your promise, Ryofu-chan," Lilith said in a soft voice. "Maybe you're right: maybe there will always be another army who comes along and does nothing but burn. Maybe *these* trees were victims of war, but… Ryofu-chan, *your* trees are growing all across the land, from the steppes, to the Yangtze River, to places where armies will never set foot. They still grow, and their *children* still grow, and *their* legacy will *still* be growing long after everyone has forgotten the names of who burned which city, or which army won which battle."

Another long silence followed. At length, Ryofu stood, stretched, then held her arm out toward the falcon balancing on Heaven Piercer. The raptor hopped down onto her arm, and she brought her face alongside its, whispering thanks. The great bird briefly rubbed

against her cheek, then spread its wings and took to the air, flying away to the north.

Ryofu watched it until it was a speck against the night sky, then picked up a worn pack and slung it over her shoulders before taking Heaven Piercer from the ground.

She then turned to Lilith and nodded slowly. "I'm ready. Take me home."

Smiling softly, Lilith rose and held out one hand, which Ryofu took in hers. Soon the reddish glow from the distant fires was eclipsed by a green more beautiful than even the gardens had been.

"Your boon is granted, Ryofu-chan," the goddess whispered.

At least once a week (more frequently if it was pressing), the morning meal at Strawberry Hall was preceded by a series of announcements in the form of news, topics of general interest to the students, upcoming events, and so forth. This was, by now, a well-ingrained part of the standard routine, and while the gathered students gave it the sleepy attention that politeness demanded, for the most part none of the bulletins would be remembered by lunchtime.

"That concludes student affairs for the week," Hikari said from her place at the head table, then sat down as Amane rose in her place, holding a single sheet of paper in her hands.

"Our last announcement is primarily of interest to the Equestrian team, or others who frequent the stables at St. Spica. Many of you are familiar with Nagawara-san, who has faithfully taken care of our stables and horses for nearly four decades. While he was planning to retire at the end of this academic year, due to an unexpected windfall he has chosen to do so effective immediately. Speaking both personally and as the captain of the Equestrian team, I am grateful

to Nagawara-san for his years of service, and wish him nothing but the best in his retirement."

Hazuki exchanged glances with Tamao, seated to her left. From what she had gathered during her time here, mid-year staff changes were even more uncommon than transfer students.

"Although Nagawara-san is in many ways irreplaceable, I am pleased to announce that his successor comes to us with the highest recommendation. Her name is Ren Fengxian, and we are confident that she will carry on Nagawara-san's excellent work."

This name was enough to snap Hazuki to full attention. Fengxian..? That was the Chinese reading of the kanji for…

The light dawned, and a shiver of excitement ran through her. "She's here," Hazuki whispered, a slow smile crossing her face.

Tamao gave her a thoroughly puzzled look, but before she could say anything, Amane continued. "While Fengxian-san speaks our language fluently, this will be her first time actually living in Japan. If you are so inclined, please visit her at the St. Spica stables and welcome her to Astraea Hill. This concludes the announcements."

As Amane sat, the students began to chat animatedly amongst themselves, mostly about the unusual final announcement. Hazuki sat back in her chair, unable to keep herself from smiling like a fool. The more time that had passed since their most recent visit to the Great Library, the more she had begun to wonder if this day would actually happen after all.

"Who's here?" asked Yaya, leaning toward them across the table. "Do you know this person?"

"I certainly do," Hazuki grinned, then turned to Tamao. "And so do *you* ."

For a few seconds, Tamao could only shake her head, but then her eyes went wide. "Oh! You mean… Is it… *that* Ren?"

" *What* Ren?" Yaya frowned. "Who *is* she?"

"Just an old friend," Hazuki sighed happily. "An old friend who's finally coming home."

Next: Horses

I aten't dead.

For commentary and meta, please join us at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook. Thanks for reading!

Horses

I want to feed and water the horses - the course is long and dry

Can't do it alone, oh no we can't, although we try and try and try

We may not deserve you, we'll come to serve you by and by

Feed and water the horses where they lie

-Indigo Girls

Part 19: Horses

" *You… you want to come to our world?"*

Ryofu nodded slowly. "Lilith offered me a boon for my part in stopping the yaka. I'd like to ask her for this, but… only if you and the others think I would be welcome there."

" *That's…" Hazuki started, but could not finish the thought, so she tried again. "Our world is very different from yours, Ren. I know you only saw it briefly, but it's actually a lot like the one we just left. It's nearly two thousand years ahead of yours in terms of technology, and…"*

" *Does it have animals?" Ryofu asked.*

" *Um, yes, of course."*

" *Then it has everything I need. Animals to take care of, and friends to be with. My world… does not have both of these things any longer."*

Hazuki saw something in Ryofu's normally blank eyes, then: an ache of unfathomable loneliness. She knew Ryofu's past, of course: she had been alone most of her early life, but then had found a home and a family that she loved with all her being. And now they were all gone. Hazuki remembered many times in which she'd wondered what it would be like to outlive friends, family and loved ones. Here, in those dark-rose eyes, was her answer.

Thinking of this, of course, made her think again of Chou'un, and she found that she could not allow that. Not now. "Ren," she said gently, "I can't speak for my whole world, but I'd be happy to have you stay with us. Only… I don't know how fair it would be to drop you into modern Japan, and… I don't know if we could pass you off as a high school student."

" *Lilith said she'd find a way for me to live there," Ryofu said. "But I won't come without your permission."*

Several hours after the announcement that heralded Ryofu's arrival, Hazuki ventured out to the stables to be met with the incongruous sight of China's mightiest warrior, dressed in a black tank top, blue jeans and a pair of work boots, already hard at work mucking out a stall. Part of Hazuki could not help but wonder at the ignominy of it, but Ryofu did not seem the least bit displeased with her new calling.

This, apparently, was the way Lilith had found: probably giving fate a nudge here and there so that Nagawara-san could have his happy retirement, and presumably giving "Ren Fengxian" sufficient identity and retroactive history to get her past the background check and successfully hired on. Most likely it was child's play for the goddess who made the books in the first place, but it made Hazuki very uncomfortable to wonder why Lilith had done this for Ryofu, and yet had not done something similar for Kaori.

Shelving that thought for now, Hazuki leaned against the railing of the stall and smiled. "Not wasting any time, I see."

Ryofu looked over and returned Hazuki's smile. "The man who was here before me worked hard. I'll be sure to do the same."

"How long have you been here?"

"I moved into the caretaker's cottage yesterday."

"Hmm, how are you liking it so far?"

Ryofu pondered this for a moment. "The bed is comfortable," she said at last. "They say I'll be able to have dogs if they're well trained. But I think I'll need help figuring out how the bath works."

"We'll help," Hazuki chuckled. "We have centuries of advances to catch you up on, I'm afraid. Have you been okay for food, though?"

"I found a place that sells meat buns. Your money is different, but it works the same way."

"I'm pretty good in a kitchen, so I can show you how all of that works as well, if you'd like."

After giving a slow nod, Ryofu's forehead creased into a slight frown. "I'm not as strong as I used to be," she said simply.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like the world where we fought the dead things. I'm still strong from the *Souma*, but I'm not as strong as I was on my original world." She indicated one of her tattoos, part of which snaked out from behind the strap of her tank top. "These used to be warm to the touch all the time, but now they're the same as the rest of my skin. I don't think they work anymore."

"Ah," Hazuki nodded as realization dawned. "That's right, you said a sorcerer gave those to you. I've heard this book is very much on the mundane side of the scale when it comes to world-magic. Will you be okay with that?"

"Just new limits to learn," Ryofu shrugged. "I may need your help with that as well."

"We'll help," Hazuki assured her again. "Chikaru's already talking about how nice it'll be to meditate with you, if you're willing."

Ryofu paused in her work, looked again at Hazuki, and gave another of her tiny smiles. Small as it was, though, it was positively laden with meaning, not the least of which being deep gratitude. "I'll look forward to it."

Though it had only been a matter of weeks, by her perspective, since she had seen Ryofu, Hazuki could not help feeling like it had been a lot longer. "Should I wait until you're off duty before I give you a welcome-back hug? No sense getting you in trouble on your first day."

"We should probably wait until I don't have horse dung all over me."

Hazuki laughed, then stepped around the railing and approached her old friend. "May I?" she asked as she raised her hand to the other woman's cheek.

In reply, as she had done several times before, Ryofu instead leaned forward and brushed the side of her face against Hazuki's as though she were a cat. There was a brief but pleasant exchange of *Souma* between them, which served to reunite the sister warriors at least as well as any embrace.

As Student Council President, Chikaru was expected to keep specific office hours during the week in order to make her more accessible to any students that might need her assistance, particularly for those who did not live in the dormitory. While there were relatively few "problems" as such with the Lulim student body, it was still rare that one of these office periods would pass without a visitor of some sort, for pleasant conversation if nothing else. These

visits had only increased as things had gotten underway with *Pirates* .

Thus, when Chikaru looked up from her desk at the sound of a knock on her open door, she was not as surprised as she normally might have been to see someone in a Miator uniform standing there. "Hello, Mizushima-san," she smiled. "Please, come in and have a seat. What can I do for you?"

Mizushima Noriko nodded and stepped into the office, but did not take the indicated seat. "I… have a concern, senpai," she said.

"About what?"

"About the Major-General's song."

"Oh, what of it?"

Noriko made a face. "It's terrible."

"Could you be more specific?" Chikaru asked, trying very hard not to smile at the younger girl's look of consternation.

"What I mean is that it's completely insane!" Noriko exploded, throwing up her arms dramatically. "It's just words and words and words! No human being should ever have to sing that much that quickly!"

At this, Chikaru could not completely hold back her amusement. "May I remind you, Mizushima-san, that you were the one who flawlessly sang *Two-Faced Lovers* at karaoke?"

"Yeah, but those words *make sense!* " Noriko fumed. " *Nothing* in this song makes *any* sense! It's practically gibberish!"

"The original song had references that only the English of that time would be able to fully appreciate," Chikaru explained patiently. "The joke of it is that you have a military commander of high rank who knows everything about an impossibly wide range of subjects, but

somehow doesn't understand anything about actual warfare and tactics. It was a parody of some of the English military figures of the time."

"Are we going to have subtitles that explain that to everyone, then?" Noriko asked, raising an eyebrow, "because the joke's completely lost in translation. Can't we cut a verse? Or two? Or the whole thing?"

"Mizushima-san," Chikaru smiled, crossing her arms on her desk and leaning forward slightly, "this is the most famous song in the entire work, and one of the most famous in the entire history of light opera."

"So no pressure," said Noriko with a roll of the eyes. "Are you sure we can't cut it a little? Just the second verse, maybe?"

"Actually, I was thinking quite the opposite," Chikaru went on smiling. "You see, it has become something of a tradition in modern productions of this work to add a *fourth* verse to use as an encore…"

" *A fourth?!"*

"… and to make it topical for the *current* audience," Chikaru finished. "And this, Mizushima-san, is another reason I wanted *you* for this part."

The younger girl blinked in surprise. "What? Why me?"

"Because if I can think of anyone fearless enough to launch a scathing satire of the world around us… it's you."

There was a long silence, and then Noriko narrowed her eyes at the Lulim president. "All right… I'm listening."

The next day, Hazuki found Ryofu back behind the main stable complex, busying herself with a row of what looked like large potted

plants… or at least the *potential* for plants, as nothing was growing out of the loose dirt inside the pots themselves.

"What are you working on?" Hazuki asked.

"I asked the groundskeeper if I could plant some trees," said Ryofu, not looking up from her work. "He said there was a spot that was clear-cut for building, but then there was something unstable with the ground so they couldn't, and he was going to replant it anyway." She patted the dirt down on the pot she had been working on, whispered " *Shia,"* then stood up and looked over her shoulder at her visitor. "I'll get them started here and then transfer them when they've grown a bit."

Hazuki nodded, puzzled at what the whispered word had meant, but not wanting to ask.

The puzzlement must have shown on her face, though, because Ryofu looked back down at the pot she had just finished, then back to Hazuki. "Where Chinkyuu and I lived in the mountains," she said, "there were many trees like these. Cedar. Strong, tall, nice to smell, and always green. As… people who were important to me began to die, I started planting trees in their honor, one for each who was gone. Before Chinkyuu died, she asked me to plant a tree for her as well, but to do it in a very special place. When she was gone, I took seeds from her favorite tree, then seeds from all the other ones I'd planted, and took them to Shambhala."

"You… you've been to Shambhala?" Hazuki whispered. "You mean it's real?"

"I planted her first tree there," Ryofu nodded, "along with the children of my other important trees. When they grew strong enough to have seeds of their own, I took those and moved on, and planted *those* trees' children somewhere else. Then when those trees grew up, I did it again, and again."

"That's… amazing, Ren," Hazuki said softly, unable to describe it any other way.

Ryofu knelt, rummaged though a bag that was lying beside the pot she had been working on, then pulled out a smaller sack with a familiar kanji character scrawled on its surface. She then walked to the next pot and patted its rim. "This one is for Sei. Would you like to help plant it?"

"More than you know," Hazuki nodded, feeling her eyes getting misty.

They worked the earth together, mixing dirt from a wheelbarrow with potting soil from a bag, and while they did, Ryofu went on speaking. "I lived like that for a while, staying in one place long enough for the trees to mature, then moving on and planting again. For a while I thought maybe I'd plant a tree for everyone I'd ever killed in war, but… I don't know that I ever can."

"We'll just have to keep planting more, then," Hazuki smiled sadly. "How many have you done so far?"

"I stopped counting," the former general replied. She then reached into the sack marked with the kanji for Chou'un's *mana*, pulled out a seed-cone, carefully shook some of its seeds into the hole they had made, and filled it in. Once they patted it down, Ryofu lay her hand over the earth and whispered " *Sei."*

" *Sei,"* Hazuki whispered as well, laying her hand next to Ryofu's.

"The next one is for Aisha," said Ryofu.

"Still together, then," Hazuki smiled wanly. "That's appropriate."

As they began working the next pot, Ryofu went on with her story, and it occurred to Hazuki that her friend was being amazingly talkative by her standards. "As I traveled, I gathered other seeds wherever I went, and I started planting those at the places I settled

as well. I'd also have animals living with me. Then the Khan's people found me, and took me to meet him."

"The… Khan?" Hazuki asked. "Which one?"

"Kublai Khan. He was building a new capital, and asked me to keep the grounds in his gardens, so I planted my important trees there, along with all the other things I collected in my travels. He let the animals live there too, as long as I told them not to hurt any people. That was a nice place. I stayed there longer than the others."

Hazuki's jaw slowly went slack as Ryofu told this part of her tale. "Kublai… Ren, are you talking about Xanadu?"

"Shangdu," Ryofu corrected her.

"Right, Shangdu… with the pleasure-dome, and the gardens, and the wild animals running tame?"

"Yes," Ryofu nodded. "The seeds we're using were from the trees I planted there." A shadow then crossed her face. "Those trees were burned when the Ming armies took the city," she said quietly, "but I was able to gather their seeds first, and now their children will grow here."

The older woman went back to working with the dirt, but when Hazuki did not make a move to join her, she looked back. "What?" she asked.

"Ren… you lived in the time of the Han Dynasty. By the modern calendar, that was the Second Century, going into the Third."

Ryofu nodded, but said nothing.

"The rise of the Ming Dynasty and the fall of Shangdu were in the *Thirteenth* Century," Hazuki went on.

Another nod, but again no words.

"That would mean… you wandered China planting trees for about *a thousand years* ."

Ryofu blinked twice, then looked off toward the late sun, as if pondering this.

"I… *may* have lost track of time…" she said at length.

For a while, the gymnasium was quiet enough to hear the proverbial pin drop, but then the air became filled with frantic whispering as the members of *Kachou Kamen* gradually got over their collective shock at the pre-workout spar they had just witnessed.

"Okay," said Kizuna quietly, "did I just land in an alternate universe, or did we just see Hazuki-senpai and Kenjō-senpai get *completely* taken out… at the *same time*… by the new *stable hand?* "

Remon nodded slowly as they watched the pink-haired woman extend a hand to Kaname to help her stand. "Well, she *did* have that huge naginata when we met her a few weeks ago," she noted. "I guess she's, uh, pretty good."

"Do you think maybe she was one of Hazuki-senpai's masters?" Kizuna wondered.

"Well, whoever she is," Kojima-sensei said, arms crossed and a rare smile crossing her face, "I hope she likes alcohol."

Remon gave their teacher a puzzled look. "Why's that?"

"Because if she does," the sensei nodded, "I just got myself a new drinking buddy."

To call the stable-keeper's cottage spartan in décor would be a gross understatement, Tamao decided. The main room had little more than an unpadded wooden bench and a small, worn tea table. "Were you

not allowed to bring anything with you from your previous world?" she asked the new occupant.

"I had little to bring," said Ryofu. "Only my weapon and my bag."

Tamao looked up at the indicated weapon, which was hanging over the small fireplace, along with a very aged pink and black mask in the shape of a butterfly's wings, matching the blue one she had brought back to Hazuki during her first visit to this world. "Is it… legal for you to have that here?" she asked, looking over the well-worn blades. "The laws in this country are actually really strict about bladed weapons. I found out about that the hard way a few months ago."

"Lilith arranged that it be considered a family heirloom, so it's an exception. I have papers for it."

"That's good to know," Tamao nodded, not wishing to go through the mess with Hazuki's sword once again.

As if summoned by the thought of her, Hazuki emerged from the small kitchen with a tea tray. "Ren, we have *got* to take you shopping this weekend," the black-haired girl sighed. "There wasn't a lot left behind when Nagawara-san moved out: we *at least* need to get you some dishes."

"I found a place that sells-" Ryofu began.

"You can't live on meat buns alone, Ren," Hazuki frowned.

There was a long silence as rose eyes met blue.

Hazuki rubbed her forehead with her free hand. "Okay, maybe you could. But you shouldn't have to."

The three women knelt around the tea table, and Tamao mentally added *cushions* to the shopping list. At least she could fold back her uniform skirt beneath her: poor Hazuki was bare knees on wood.

They drank their first cup together in silence, after which Tamao smiled across the table at Ryofu. "How are you getting along with everyone so far?"

Ryofu thought about this for a moment. "The riding students are friendly," she then said. "They liked the other man a lot, but they've each introduced themselves and said they're looking forward to working with me."

"Good to know," Hazuki nodded, taking a sip from her second cup.

"I've only met a few of the other people who work for the school," Ryofu continued. "Most of them don't like me."

Tamao was shocked at how bluntly and yet how calmly that was said. "What makes you think that, Ren-san?"

"Most of them are very cold," said Ryofu. "When they think I can't hear them, they talk about me being a foreigner, or they say something about my tattoos. Some of them even say it when they know I can hear them."

Hazuki frowned at this. "I'm sorry, Ren. I'm afraid there are a lot of hard-core nationalists with a stake in these schools. They're likely to prejudge you just because you're Chinese."

"We could tell them I'm Mongol," said Ryofu. "I lived there most recently. I think I may have been born there." A faraway look crossed her face. "I don't remember much about that anymore."

"If what Hazuki-chan told me about your trees is true, I'm amazed you remember *us*, for that matter," said Tamao.

Ryofu turned her soft gaze to Tamao. "I never forget my important people."

Even though she was still getting to know Ryofu, Tamao could tell that she herself had just been greatly honored by those simple

words. "Thank you, Ren-san," she smiled.

Chikaru sometimes liked to joke that there were no "official" meetings between herself, her Vice-President, and her Secretary, but on the occasion that they did need to meet to discuss things, they did so at a small tea table in the St. Lulim council office, making them quite literally round-table discussions.

After sharing their first cup, Chikaru smiled at her assistants. "So, how fare the rehearsals thus far? I'm afraid dealing with costumes and orchestrations has kept me too busy to join you just yet."

Sayuri and Ayame exchanged a silent glance, after which the latter nodded in agreement before answering the question. It continued to amuse Chikaru the way these two could communicate so closely without words, and they didn't even have *Souma* to help them along. "There hasn't been much progress with staging yet, but I've led the chorus through some dance and movement exercises, trying to gauge everyone's ability so I can plan accordingly."

"And what have you found?"

"I… think we have the potential for some nice visuals," the Secretary considered. "They're not a ballet troupe by any means, but they take direction well, and they move together well." She then gave Chikaru a smirk. "You'll probably be pleased to hear that the girls involved in the various martial arts activities are leading the way in that regard, so we can thank Kojima-sensei and your Big Girlfriend for at least some of this."

"I'm sure Hazuki would be thrilled," said Chikaru dryly. "That's good to hear, Ayame-chan. Keep up the good work."

"Of course," Ayame smiled, giving her a small seated bow.

Chikaru then turned her attention to her Vice-President, who was looking considerably less optimistic. "Sayuri-chan? I'm guessing the

news has not been as good from the musical side of things?"

"Oh, no, there's plenty of good news, musically," Sayuri said with a shake of the head. "The choruses sound promising so far, and I think the voices are balanced enough between the ladies, the pirates and the police that none of them should drown out the others in the combined numbers. I'm guessing that the majority of them seem to be using the rehearsal materials we provided, because we're not really losing any ground between meetings: they aren't having to re-learn things every time we get together. We've made enough cuts that I think we should be able to get everyone up to speed on the remaining material within plenty of time. It's actually *very* encouraging on the chorus side."

The last was a loaded statement, Chikaru could tell. "So… tell me about the principals?"

Sayuri looked to her partner for a moment before she continued. "Mostly good news. My largest overall concern with the soloists would be volume, and I'm just going to throw this out right now: I think we need to seriously consider miking them."

"I was hoping we could avoid that," Chikaru frowned.

"I know, and I was too," Sayuri sighed. "But… take Konohana-sama for example. She has a sweet voice, she's very accurate, and I think she'll even be able to pull off the coloratura, but… *Poor Wandering One* doesn't need a sweet voice as much as it needs a voice that can hit the back row of the theater and bounce back, and I'm not sure she has that. Maybe it will come with practice, once she's more confident with the music, but for now, not so much."

"I see," Chikaru nodded. "And the other principals?"

Sayuri began ticking off fingers as she went through the cast. "Nanto-san is kind of in the same boat: she's got the notes, the words are coming along, but for now she's just too quiet for Frederick. Kenjō-san I'm not worried about: she's a little scatter-shot

on her pitches, but I think she knows she can get away with it playing this character. Aoi-san and your Small Girlfriend are like two *halves* of a good opera voice, so I think I may have them double up with one another on any songs that have Edith or Kate singing without the other. Mizushima-san has good enunciation, but she seems to think that Mr. Gilbert and the translator must have had it in for her, somehow."

"We've discussed that, yes," Chikaru said with a chuckle.

"Kiyashiki-sama has missed parts of two rehearsals so far, but hers is a small enough role, and she already seems to have her few solo parts memorized. And Takemura-san is having the most fun of anyone in the cast so far, I think, and what she lacks in technical merits she's more than making up for in enthusiasm and sheer ham - *perfect* for a role like Ruth."

Sayuri set her hands down in her lap, as though finished, and Chikaru could tell that her Vice-President was hoping that no one would notice the significant omission from her list. Chikaru took a sip of her tea, allowing the silence to stretch a bit between them before she spoke.

"And what of the *other* Étoile-sama?"

For a split second, Sayuri's face fell, but she just as quickly covered it up. "Ōtori-sama is… a very impressive woman. Very admirable."

"That she is."

"We all know she can take the stage and make it her own. You saw that more closely than any of us last year."

"Indeed. Once she steps into her role, she has magnificent stage presence."

"Very much so," Sayuri smiled, nodding with obviously forced enthusiasm.

"But… can she carry a tune?"

The smile evaporated. "Not even if I put handles on it."

Chikaru made a sincere effort not to laugh, because she knew that Sayuri was not being malicious to the Étoile so much as deeply concerned for the future of their show. "I… see. Level with me, then: is she a lost cause, musically?"

"That's… the frustrating part," Sayuri said carefully. "Ōtori-sama has more natural charisma in her left hand than most of us have in our entire bodies, but once it's time to sing, she just shuts down. I can't even say whether or not she *can* sing, because it seems patently obvious that *she* doesn't think she can, and I can't coax enough out of her to learn otherwise."

"And yet she never misses a rehearsal, and she's always on time," Ayame pointed out. "She bears the struggle in full view of the cast. I never thought I'd have occasion to feel sorry for Étoile-sama, but this *has* to be humiliating for her."

"Chikaru, you know I'd never doubt your judgment," Sayuri continued, "but I think you might want to at least consider an understudy. I'd suggest your Big Girlfriend, but her voice is one of the smaller ones out there."

"Never be afraid to express your doubts, Sayuri-chan," said Chikaru, "in this venture more than ever." She then steepled her fingers in front of her face as she pondered this. "Still, I believe that Amane-sama has it in her, if we can make the experience less… humiliating, as you said. She may require more one-to-one instructions than the others."

"I'll try to make time for private rehearsals, then," Sayuri nodded. "Though… it would make me feel better if you could be there as well, Chikaru. I think she might be more… *receptive* to a friend."

"Perhaps, perhaps…"

While "spare time" was a relative term for Hazuki due to her reduced need for sleep, it could not be denied that once rehearsals kicked in, she was finding herself on her own more frequently. As a member of the chorus of police officers, she was only in the second act of the show, and thus had fewer calls on her time than Tamao. *Certainly* fewer than Chikaru.

As a consequence, she was finding herself spending a lot more time out at the equestrian range, either watching the riders go through their drills or just keeping a distant eye on Ryofu as she worked. While she did not want to crowd her friend while she was on-duty, it was still comforting to see her there, and to feel the muted glow of her *Souma* presence even at this distance.

The irony was not lost on Hazuki: Ryofu was the one who had been mostly alone for a thousand years, and yet it was Hazuki who kept coming out to make sure she was still there, as though fearful of a return to isolation for the (much) older woman. While Ryofu seemed quietly content with going about her daily work alone, Hazuki was the one who found herself feeling clingy and protective.

For now, she settled for watching from outside the fences, which was where Amane found her. "Hazuki-san?"

"Étoile-sama," Hazuki nodded, giving the other girl a polite smile.

They stood together for a few moments watching the junior students go through their exercises, at which point Amane took a breath to speak, then hesitated. "Hazuki-san," she said at length.

"Yes, Étoile-sama?"

"I wanted to talk to you about… your friend Fengxian-san."

Hazuki blinked at the Étoile. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, more than okay," Amane assured her. "She's picked up on everything very quickly. It's been quite amazing, really."

"Oh, good," Hazuki smiled. "Then… what did you want to talk about?"

The look Amane gave her was not so much uneasy as simply confused. "I suppose… I'm just a little surprised by *how well* she's picked up on everything, if that makes any sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Well… this *may* sound unbelievable…" Amane began.

"You *do* remember who you're talking to, right, Étoile-sama?" Hazuki grinned.

"Good point," Amane acknowledged, letting a chuckle escape. "I suppose my question comes down to this: who *is* she?"

Hazuki glanced back to the stables, to see the subject of their conversation leading a horse out onto the fenced oval and handing the reins to a third-year. "Well, that's actually a really long story, so… do you mean anything specific?"

"She talks to the horses, Hazuki-san," Amane said bluntly. "That is to say, *all of us* talk to them to *some* degree, but I truly believe they *understand* her. It isn't only words, either: sometimes she'll calm even the most spooked thoroughbred with a touch, a glance, and maybe a few noises in her throat. The reason that I'm the only one who rides Starbright is because he doesn't like anyone else touching him, but she had him literally eating out of her hand on her first day. I've heard of the *idea* of a horse whisperer, but… I never truly believed they existed."

"I can't say I'm surprised," Hazuki smiled warmly. "She's the same way with dogs."

"And other things, apparently," Amane went on. "I'm serious, Hazuki-san. Birds will come and land on her shoulders out of nowhere. Cats always nap close to where she's working, then when she goes somewhere else in the stables they get up and follow her so they can go back to napping in her company. Squirrels come down from the trees and hang around on windowsills and fenceposts, just watching her." The Étoile chuckled again. "What is she - an animal expert or a Disney princess?"

Hazuki had a sudden, rather disturbing image of Ryofu starring in the single bloodiest Disney movie ever, then quickly dismissed it. "She's… she's just Ren," she shrugged. "I don't know how else to describe it. She's not like anyone else I've ever met, and I've traveled quite a lot, if you remember."

"I remember," Amane nodded. "So… is she… someone like you?"

Hazuki was about to repeat what she had just said, but then she sussed the Étoile's meaning. "Someone not from around these parts? Yeah, she's… not local, that's safe to say."

"She… knew Naoko-sama, then?" Amane asked with some apparent difficulty. Apparently the Étoile was still reluctant to speak much about things supernatural, even having witnessed some of them herself.

"She was another of Eve's sisters, like Chikaru and me, yes."

Amane nodded slowly. "I suppose that more or less explains it, but…" She again trailed off, looking more uneasy than ever.

"What it is, Étoile-sama?" Hazuki asked gently.

"Well, with… *three* of you here… actually *more* than three, come to think of it… does that mean that there's some sort of danger coming?"

"Ah," Hazuki nodded, giving Amane a wry smile. "No, I think our world's off the hook for any of that, at least for a while. Ren's just led a long and interesting life, and she's… ready for a nice, quiet retirement, I think…"

"Shizuma spoils me too much."

"What?" Shizuma asked in a playful voice as she took Nagisa's hand. "You're the one who insisted on paying for lunch, not me."

Nagisa stuck out her tongue at the taller girl, entwining their fingers as they continued their stroll through the town at the base of Astraea Hill. "I don't mean *that* . I mean driving all this way *again* to spend time with me this weekend. Don't you have homework and studying to do?"

"Mountains of it," Shizuma teased.

"That's not funny! I don't want to be the reason for you getting bad grades! How can you expect me to study hard to join you there if you're going to flunk out first?"

"Ouch," said Shizuma, miming an arrow to the chest. "You've already resigned me to flunking out?"

"Of course not," Nagisa protested. "It's just that… Shizuma already makes so much time for me as it is, and… I've heard horror stories of what the first year at Tōdai is like. I just don't want to distract you too much."

Shizuma stopped walking and gently turned Nagisa to face her. "Okay," she said, laying her free hand against her fiancée's cheek, "I was kidding about the mountains, at least for now. I'm actually all caught up, and even ahead in a lot of my subjects."

"Good," Nagisa smiled against her palm.

"Considering that I have no semblance of a social life over there, I have nothing better to do than sit in my hermitage and study. That being said, I can see those mountains on the horizon, and I know that in a few weeks I'll be spending every waking moment in the library or with my nose buried in a book, so… I want to enjoy these chances to see my darling while I can." She then gently tapped Nagisa on the tip of the nose. "Okay?"

"Okay. Just don't fall behind on my behalf, please? You have important goals."

"And I'll meet them, with you at my side," Shizuma assured her.

Nagisa smiled radiantly at that, and Shizuma was tempted to kiss her right there on the sidewalk, propriety be damned.

Before she could make good on this urge, though, there was a yelp and a series of thunks and clatters from close by. The two girls turned to see that an old man had fallen while crossing the street nearby, scattering the contents of his grocery bags along the crosswalk. He seemed uninjured, but was having obvious difficulty getting up, and the light would be changing soon.

They paused just long enough to share a concerned look with one another before they hurried out to help him, Nagisa gathering the wayward cans and packages while Shizuma assisted the fellow in getting to his feet. "Are you hurt, ojii-san?" Shizuma asked him.

"Oh, aren't you two the kindest," the man wheezed as he righted himself. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Let me take those, my dear."

"Let's get you across the street first, ojii-san," Nagisa smiled. The light had changed by now, and there were a couple of honks from cross-traffic, but Shizuma shot a friendly smile at the impatient drivers as she assisted the old man to the opposite sidewalk, and that seemed to quiet them down.

"Bless you, ladies, bless you," he said in a voice barely louder than a mutter. "Fancy an old coot like me rescued by two young lovelies like yourselves. And a fine couple you make, I might add!"

"Couple, ojii-san?" Shizuma repeated, exchanging surprised glances with Nagisa. Maybe they were being too obvious after all.

"Now, now, child," he laughed, "my eyes may be going, but I know two people in love when I see them. Be sure to cherish that, both of you."

"Oh, we do," Nagisa smiled, but she was blushing a bit as well.

"Good, good. Now let me take those bags back, and I'll be on my way."

He reached shakily for the bags that Nagisa was carrying, still looking as though he might topple over at any moment, and it was obvious that Nagisa was reluctant to relinquish them given the old man's state.

"Where are you headed, ojii-san?" Shizuma asked then. "Perhaps we can help you get where you're going?"

The old man blinked up at her a few times, then gave her a gap-toothed smile. "Well, what kind of man would I be to refuse the kindness of two young ladies?"

They accompanied him to the nearby train station, Nagisa carrying the groceries while Shizuma lent him her arm to steady his slow, unsteady gait. They chatted a bit along the way, with the old man showing mild (but polite) curiosity about things like how they had met, or how long they had been together, and while Shizuma gave only general answers, she found it oddly heartening to be able to talk about this with a non-judgmental stranger.

Before long they came to the rail station. In spite of his protests, they even bought themselves passes so that they could walk with him

right up to the platform, and when the train eventually rolled in and came to a stop, they steadied him as he stepped aboard.

"Will you be okay once you reach your stop, ojii-san?" Nagisa asked as they stood outside the train's sliding doors. "We could come with you if you like?"

With a softer smile, then, the old man took the grocery bags from Nagisa's outstretched hand and lifted them with no apparent difficulty into the train car behind him. He then reached out both hands and gently grasped each of them by the wrist. Shizuma was immediately struck by how warm his hand was: a gentle warmth that seemed to radiate through her from this touch.

"Hanazono Shizuma, Aoi Nagisa," he nodded to them, "a traveler's blessing to you both. And remember what I said about cherishing what you have!"

He released them just as the doors began to close, and waved at them through the windowed doors as the train pulled away.

Shizuma looked at Nagisa, who was absently rubbing her wrist where he had held it, her face the very picture of confusion.

"We… didn't tell him our names, did we, Shizuma..?"

Chikaru narrowed her eyes at the younger girl. "Tamao-chan, take off your bra."

From her vantage point, seated at Chikaru's desk, Hazuki got nothing less than a perfect view of Tamao's shocked face as Chikaru made that demand. Definitely an image to remember.

The three of them were in Chikaru's room, as was so often the case these days, and Chikaru was using this opportunity to take measurements of Tamao for a head-start on her costume for *Pirates.* This had eventually led to Tamao standing on a stepstool in her

underwear while Chikaru bustled about with her tape measure and a notepad, and Hazuki sat at the desk glancing through some sketchbooks that had been left out (but mostly watching as her near-naked girlfriend was fussed over by their other girlfriend).

"Um… what do you need me to do that for, Chikaru?" Tamao asked, undoubtedly not offended by the request, but visibly confused nonetheless.

"Because it's obvious that it doesn't fit you well enough," Chikaru replied, indicating places where the underwire just wasn't sitting properly. "That *has* to be uncomfortable, my love."

"But I just *got* this one," Tamao frowned. "It was the best fit I could find in the store."

"Have you ever been properly measured?" Chikaru asked.

"Um… not as such. I've just always gone with what felt best, and assumed that was my size."

"Another young woman betrayed by the fashion industry," Chikaru sighed expressively. "Sad, really. Now take off that bra already."

Hazuki tried not to smile too widely as Tamao complied. The poor girl wasn't sure how to react to this: she obviously had no problem with the idea of exposing herself in front of Chikaru, but Hazuki was quite certain that Tamao would have preferred a different circumstance in which to do so. Either way, the involuntary blush and the abortive attempt to cover herself after stripping off the garment in question were adorable.

"Underbust first," Chikaru said, looping the tape around Tamao's back and bringing the end in to measure directly beneath her breasts. She crouched slightly to bring her eyes in line with the measurement, and it was at this moment that Hazuki desperately wished she had a camera, because Tamao looked about ready to burst from this unexpected proximity.

"And now bust," Chikaru continued. "Bend at the waist, Tamao-chan. A full bow, if you will."

"But why?" Tamao asked, even as she leaned over. "Can't you just take that measurement while I'm standing?"

"This is for a more accurate result, my dear," Chikaru explained. "Regardless of how firm you are, when you're standing the mass spreads out, as it were, but when you're bending forward, gravity becomes our friend for a change, and we can get a feel for how full they actually are. Now, as much as I might wish I had four hands right now, I am stuck with the two I have, so please hold the tape against the fullest part of your chest while I measure."

"Of- of course," Tamao stammered, taking the length of tape looped beneath her and holding it to her breasts.

Chikaru tightened the tape lightly around her, then nodded decisively. "I thought so," she said. "You can stand up straight now, Tamao-chan."

"What's the prognosis, doctor?" Hazuki asked.

"The prognosis is that this bra is all wrong for you," Chikaru said, picking up the garment from her bed and reading the tag. "You should be wearing an F65."

" *F?!"* Tamao all but gasped. "That- that can't be possible! I- I know I've grown recently, but… I can't need an *F* cup!" She looked down at herself, then turned helpless eyes on Hazuki. "Hazuki-chan wears an F, and hers are bigger than mine!"

"And again, the seamstress is deeply disappointed by the way so few women understand their own figures," Chikaru said with another melodramatic sigh. "The fashion industry truly has a lot to answer for. Cup size is not an absolute measurement of volume, my sweet. You may have noticed that Hazuki-chan has a much broader *back* than you: she wears an F *75* . Cup size is merely indicative of the

mathematical difference between bust and underbust. Yours are an F on your smaller frame, and hers are an F in relation to her larger ribcage. Larger overall, but approximately the same in ratio."

"Oh," said Tamao quietly, again glancing between herself and Hazuki. "I… guess I never thought of that. Now I feel silly."

"I didn't know this either until she told me," Hazuki assured Tamao.

Chikaru cast an acknowledging smile back at Hazuki. "The difficulty, of course, is that F65 is an unusual size: it's no wonder you weren't able to find anything that fit properly. Meanwhile, common retailers will try to convince you that you're one of the more standard sizes so that you'll buy from them. It's specialty stores and mail order from here, I'm afraid. I can point you to a few, if you'd like."

"Please," Tamao nodded. "Um… are you an… *unusual* size as well?"

"Of the three of us, I'm afraid only Hazuki-chan has a decent shot of buying something off the rack," said Chikaru, "and even that's questionable."

"Bra makers obviously never accounted for *Souma*," Hazuki smirked.

"Indeed," Chikaru agreed. Very good, Tamao-chan, that's all the measurements I need. You can get dressed now, as much as it pains me to see you put this bra on again."

To the profound shock of both Tamao, as the recipient, and Hazuki, as the observer, Chikaru then leaned forward and planted a kiss on Tamao's bare chest, directly between her breasts, before backing away and handing the offending garment to her. "You have a lovely body, Tamao-chan. Be sure to take care of it in all things."

"Um… if… if it… *pains* you to see me put it on," Tamao stammered, her face simply on fire, "I could always, um, leave it off..? Um, particularly if you, um, wanted to maybe do that again..?"

"The door is still unlocked, my sweet," Chikaru winked. "Better that you get dressed, I think, and let Hazuki-chan do the rest later."

For a moment, Hazuki considered taking Chikaru to task for teasing their third so thoroughly, but the look on Tamao's face as she began to re-dress herself made her think better of it: while flustered, to be sure, she was also trying with very little success to conceal a huge smile. Rather than that, then, Hazuki picked up the next of the sketchbooks on Chikaru's desk and opened the cover.

"You *might* not want to look at *that* one, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru warned her suddenly, but by then it was too late.

Smiling back at her from the first page was a face that had for so long been her life and her dream. While it was only in pencil, it was a stunningly lifelike portrait of the goddess that had been their sister, sitting in a *seiza* pose. Her hands, folded in her lap, were the only concessions to modesty, as her hair was brushed back behind her shoulders, and their ever-present bows were, Hazuki quickly realized, the only clothing Eve was wearing.

"Oh, my goodness," she whispered.

"What?" Tamao asked, coming around behind to look over her shoulder while buttoning up the front of her uniform. "What is it - oh!"

For a few moments, both women stared silently at the image of the goddess, then at length Tamao spoke. "I… shouldn't be seeing this, should I?" she whispered, making no actual effort to look away.

"Neither should I," Hazuki nodded, similarly unable to tear her eyes from the page.

"Actually, she specifically said that she didn't mind if either of you saw it," Chikaru said softly, sounding mildly embarrassed.

Here, at last, Hazuki looked away to meet Chikaru's eyes. "When did you draw this? It has to be recent, right?"

"How can you tell?" Tamao asked.

"Well… it's just that this is obviously *Eve*," Hazuki tried to explain. "I never knew her when she was Naoko, but… she carries herself differently as Eve than she ever did as Hatsumi. I don't know if I can put it into words, but… you absolutely captured that here."

"No, you're right," said Chikaru. "She posed for this portrait the last time we were at the Great Library together. It was… my boon, actually."

Hazuki glanced down at the sketchbook in her hands again, oddly mindful of the fact that Tamao was right there at her shoulder as she again took in the *very* topless image of her first love, but Tamao herself was also staring, leaving Hazuki's well-developed sense of guilt somewhat lost at sea. "It's an amazing likeness," she said, realizing with a start that this was the most she had ever seen of Hatsumi.

And yet… surely that was not true? She couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen this, and somewhat recently…

"This was… your boon?" Tamao asked. "The chance to draw her?"

Chikaru gave them a soft smile. "I had a hard time thinking of anything, and to be honest I didn't want to ask too much of her, so I thought maybe I could finish something I started a few years ago. But that, my loves, is a story I will not tell now." She then very deliberately plucked the sketchbook out of Hazuki's hands and went to put it on a high shelf. " *A - ny - way*, getting to draw such a beautiful subject was a unique experience, to say the least. Perhaps my loves will allow me to do the same someday?"

"That would be… um… wow, absolutely," Hazuki nodded. The very idea of posing for Chikaru, feeling those artist's eyes studying her and letting those hands capture her image… Well, it sounded incredibly erotic, to be honest, even if Chikaru might not feel the same.

At that moment, Tamao suddenly put her arms around Hazuki's shoulders and settled into her lap to give her a small, warm kiss. The younger girl was still blushing from the sight they had just beheld, and she was smiling somewhat sheepishly as well.

"What was that for?" Hazuki asked.

"Nothing much," Tamao said softly. "Just… I think maybe I understand Hazuki-chan a little better now, that's all."

" *A - ny - way…"* Chikaru said again, "back to more important subjects, like getting Tamao-chan some better undergarments. Like I said, I know a few sources, both here and overseas. I've actually gotten some of my nicest bras from the United Kingdom, though they use a different measurement system than we do here. I can help you with the conversions."

"That reminds me," said Tamao, turning to look at Chikaru without leaving Hazuki's lap. "If you don't mind me asking, what size *do* you wear?"

"H70," said Hazuki before Chikaru could.

Chikaru gave Hazuki a surprised look. "How did you..?"

"I pay attention sometimes," Hazuki grinned, though she could feel a blush coming on. "About the important things, anyway."

Tamao, meanwhile, had seemingly been left behind at the given letter. "H?" she said in a tiny voice, her expression managing to be both delighted and somewhat horrified.

"I'm afraid so," Chikaru sighed. "Surprised?"

"Well… a little, yes!" Tamao managed. "I… suppose I always thought an H cup was something… I don't know, cartoonishly *huge*, but yours are just… *wonderful*…"

"Thank you, my sweet," Chikaru smiled. "All things are relative, remember."

"This is one of the most enjoyable conversations I've ever had, by the way," Hazuki added.

"Incorrigible as always," Chikaru winked, but then her expression became more thoughtful. "But as long as we're on the subject of my breasts, there *is* something I've been meaning to discuss with the two of you."

"And just like that, the conversation gets even better," Hazuki smiled widely.

"What is it, Chikaru?" Tamao asked.

The older girl turned away for a moment, causing Hazuki's humor to evaporate slightly. "I've been thinking," Chikaru said in a very deliberate voice. "Thinking about boundaries… most of which I've set, of course… and how those edges have been getting blurrier lately."

"Have we… done something wrong, Chikaru?" Tamao asked.

"Oh, no, far from it," Chikaru assured her. "No, my loves, you've been wonderfully patient with me all along. At the same time, though, I know that you're both… very *tactile* people. And… I *get* that, because I am too, even if my reasons are different, or even if I'm not seeking the same things you might be."

Hazuki exchanged a look of mild concern with Tamao. Chikaru was not normally this elliptical in getting to her point: this was obviously something she was struggling with. "What is it, Chikaru?" Hazuki asked, softly.

Chikaru held a breath for a moment, then let it out in a short sigh. "Well… I was just thinking that… if the two of you might want to engage in a more… *intimate* form of touching with me… let's just say

of the above-the-waist variety… I think I would be… *open* to that. Within reason, of course, and certainly in private, decorum being what it is, and…"

For a long while, Chikaru looked almost helplessly at the seated pair as she ground to a halt and awaited their reaction. As it dawned on her what Chikaru was offering, Hazuki first felt a visceral thrill at the very idea, followed by deep sympathy for Chikaru, for whom this had obviously been a difficult thing to express.

So naturally, the good and proper thing to do would be to react with the respect such a momentous divulging deserved.

"Chikaru," Hazuki said slowly, "are you offering us breast privileges?"

The Lulim president blinked several times in disbelief. "While… that is *perhaps* not the turn of phrase I would have used," she replied, "that is… technically accurate, I suppose?"

Hazuki looked again at Tamao, this time hoping desperately that the reading-each-other's-thoughts-via- *Souma* thing would work in her favor just this once. "So," she smiled. "Do you have a preference?"

To her great delight, Tamao played along. "Hmmm… I think I'd have to say… left."

"Her left or our left?"

"Her left."

"That works. I'm quite fond of her right."

"Though that's a terrible question to have to answer, Hazuki-chan."

"I know, it's hardly fair. I mean, they're both so nice."

"And I've only ever had the chance to touch her left… well, with my hand, anyway… so it sort of had an unfair advantage."

"Are you two both *quite* finished?" Chikaru sighed.

Hazuki and Tamao exchanged a positively evil smile, then stood up and approached Chikaru slowly, each with one hand outstretched as though to grab… *something* .

"I've created a pair of monsters, haven't I?" Chikaru went on, a flash of what almost looked like genuine nervousness crossing her expression.

It was at this moment that neither Hazuki nor Tamao could hold the joke any longer, and they simultaneously lunged forward to sandwich Chikaru between them in a huge hug. "Thank you, Chikaru," Tamao beamed at her. "But only if you're sure."

"Well, let's just say I wasn't feeling *quite* so sure a few seconds ago," Chikaru giggled. "But yes, my loves, I've thought this through."

"And you'll tell us if you get uncomfortable?" Hazuki asked.

"Of course."

They held the embrace for a long while, until at length Chikaru cleared her throat. "Let's see… that's my right, so that would be Hazuki-chan's hand, then?"

"Not mine. Tamao-chan, what are you up to?"

"Well, I had to give both sides a fair chance, didn't I?"

Next: Ashes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thus preventing 2017 from being a total loss for me, in spite of this year's ongoing efforts to make itself so. Here's hoping for better days ahead.

Ashes

Find another state of mind - it's time we all learned to grab hold

Strange fire burns with the motion of love

-Indigo Girls

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Part 20: Ashes

Sunday, 4:33 pm

Arms clasped behind her back, Chikaru stood opposite the desk of Sister Mizue Hamasaka, while the dormitory administrator herself paced the floor, looking stormier than ever. On any other day, Chikaru's mind might be frantically trying to divine a reason for this summons, but she was too exhausted for that, and anyway, it was all too obvious what they were going to discuss. She only hoped that she could spare anyone else the punishment that she suspected was coming.

Minutes passed. Hazuki had once remarked to Chikaru that she believed these long silences to be a test of patience, and Chikaru was beginning to agree. Still, she stayed silent and kept her chin up as best she could.

Finally, the elderly nun turned to her, arms crossed. "Minamoto-kun, I will say this as clearly as possible. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Sister," Chikaru whispered.

"Very well." A slight pause for breath, and then she dropped the weight of the world onto Chikaru's shoulders. "Whatever it is that you, Suzumi-kun and Azuma-kun are doing? It needs to stop. Now."

Sunday, 12:17 am

While Chikaru's bed had proven many times over to comfortably sleep three women who did not mind being cozy with one another, five was definitely pushing it.

Not that they were sleeping, however, in spite of the late hour. For that matter, they were not lying down: instead, they were sitting in as close an approximation of a circle as was possible while maintaining their individual *seiza* poses. Still, Chikaru considered, this was probably better than trying to crowd everyone into the floor of her dormitory single.

Chikaru sat with her back to the headboard, with Tamao to her immediate right, followed by Kaname and then Ryofu more or less opposite her, then back around to Hazuki at her immediate left. Everyone was holding hands, and there was a very pleasant mixture of *Souma* moving between them in a counter-clockwise circle. As it passed from one to the next and eventually around again, Chikaru could feel their breathing and heartbeats falling into rhythm together effortlessly, without any meditative guidance needed.

Not bad at all for the first time she had managed to get all five of them together. Between needing to wait for Momomi to be off-campus again (so as to not arouse her suspicion), needing to not interrupt Ryofu's work, and needing to not interfere with rehearsals, this late Saturday going into a Sunday in Chikaru's room was the best chance they were going to have.

"I don't know about all of you," Tamao said then, a small, lazy smile on her face, "but I could go on feeling this all night."

"Careful, Suzumi-san," Kaname chuckled. "You've got a fox in your usual henhouse, remember. Don't make the girlfriends jealous."

"Far from it," Chikaru smiled. "The three of us have been doing this almost every day for quite some time now. Your energy is very

welcome, Kaname, as is yours, Ren."

"Now make sure you don't *wear out* that welcome," Hazuki snickered at her fellow samurai.

"Ladies," Chikaru said patiently, trying to nip this in the bud before it could distract the flow of energy, "now that I finally have all of us together, there's something I'd like to try eventually, but… let's do a warm-up exercise first to see where we are, shall we?"

There was no reply, at least verbally, so Chikaru took a centering breath and went on. "We've guided our *Souma* to flow in this circle, and each of you should feel it passing into you from the woman on your left, through you, and then onward to the woman at your right. While you can likely feel each of the others individually in that flow, you should best be able to sense the *Souma* of the woman to your left as she sends it through you. I would like each of us to put into words what that energy feels like."

She then turned to her left and nodded to Hazuki. "Lucky me, I get to go first. Hazuki-chan, you are a river of the purest water: sometimes flowing smoothly, sometimes turbulent, but always moving along your path."

Hazuki smiled and lowered her head slightly, and Chikaru turned to Tamao and gave her a nod, silently asking her to continue.

"Oh, I get you?" Tamao said with a grin that was only slightly subdued by their shared semi-trance. "Chikaru, I've always known that you're fire, but… you're a fire that warms and gives life, like the Sun."

Chikaru immediately clamped down on the thought that the Sun could burn as easily as warm: now was not the time to let any of her own doubts escape into the flow. Instead, she nodded and turned next to Kaname.

"Yeah, you showed me this before," Kaname said vaguely. "Tamao, you're definitely wind."

For a while, it seemed that this was all that they were going to get from Kaname, but then she closed her eyes and took a breath through her nose. "But it's a warm wind, and it's… fragrant. Kind of like when you're traveling somewhere you've never been, and everything's different, but then you feel that wind that smells like… home." She then broke off, looking perhaps a little uncomfortable, so Chikaru nodded to Ryofu before Hazuki could say anything that might pull them out of the moment.

"Kaname is… blood," Ryofu said softly. "Both the blood of the Earth, and the blood that flows in our own veins." Kaname turned to give the ancient warrior a look of surprise, as though this observation had answered a question for her.

Lastly, Hazuki finished the circle. "Ren, you're… electricity, but… not the tame kind that we use every day. No, you're… you're electricity in its most raw and primal form: you're lightning."

"Very good, everyone," said Chikaru, resuming the leader's role in the exercise. "Now, with these words said, I want you to once again feel that energy passing through you, and see if you can pick out each of those five, including your own. Feel how they twist and intertwine. Mentally follow each of those scents and feelings and flavors back to the ones who created them, and feel how they bind us together. See the sources each of us carry, whether it looks to you like a spring, a sun, perhaps a sky, a beating heart, or a thunderhead. With your new senses, follow those threads forward along the path and feel how each flows in and out of its source."

She waited for a few moments to let everyone comply to the best of their ability, then moved on. "Now, I would like each of us in turn to very briefly focus on increasing our output, as though sending a pulse. We'll do it in the same order, starting with me."

With practiced ease, she sent more of her fireflies down the path, feeling them pass from girl to girl before coming back to her. Tamao went next without prompting, and now that Kaname had said it, Chikaru definitely felt a new fragrance in that familiar breeze as it passed through this larger circle.

Kaname's push of energy was slow and measured, with almost a hesitance to it, like she was afraid of controlling more than just this small amount. Ryofu's, conversely, was a swift jolt that made several of them gasp aloud at its raw strength. Lastly, Hazuki sent a cooling wave that washed over them each in turn, smoothing out the flow and relaxing them.

"You know what?" Kaname said then. "This is actually kind of awesome."

"Been trying to tell you," said Hazuki.

Chikaru smiled with a mix of amazement, delight and satisfaction. "This is going very well, everyone. I'm… well, I thought it might take us a few sessions to get to where we could even *try* the next thing, but… I wonder if we're ready for it after all?"

"What next thing, Chikaru?" Tamao asked.

"Hmm, yeah, what madness are you planning, anyway?" said Hazuki, a tiny smirk crossing her relaxed features.

"Well," said Chikaru slowly, "it's an idea that's been in the back of my mind ever since the fight with the Devourer." She then sent a warm pulse of *Souma* to Tamao before continuing. "Ren, you weren't with us at the time, but the simple truth of the matter is that I did something reckless, and I very briefly died."

She felt Tamao's hand gripping hers more tightly, and could sense that both Hazuki and Kaname were about to say something, so she spoke first. "It all worked out, though, because before it happened, I had sent part of my source of *Souma* to Tamao-chan. It was a happy

accident, to be honest: I was mostly just hoping to give her power, and the fact that she was able to hold onto my life even as my body died, well…"

"Chikaru, we get it," Kaname said in a low, uncomfortable tone. "You don't have to make her relive it."

"My apologies," Chikaru nodded, surprised to hear Kaname getting defensive of Tamao: the two of them were anything but close, after all.

"What's your idea, then?" Hazuki asked, steering them back on topic.

Rather than answer right away, Chikaru took another moment to feel the mixture of energy flowing between them. "It occurred to me," she said carefully, "that even with this power, even with a measure of immortality, we can still be hurt, or… worse. But what if, my friends, each of us does what I did then, and leaves tiny sparks of our own energy to dwell within one another? Just enough that if something dire happens to one of us, the others can restore her with those sparks?"

There was a somewhat stunned silence, which Chikaru had expected. What she had *not* expected, though, was that Hazuki would then begin to laugh: almost hard enough to fall out of the meditation. "Hazuki-chan?"

"Chikaru," Hazuki managed between chuckles, "are you suggesting that we do a RAID backup of our souls?

"I dunno, I'm not sure I'm ready to be a striped volume," Kaname added, though Chikaru could tell that she was using the joke to cover a significant level of discomfort.

"I want this," said Ryofu, her voice unusually focused.

"Ren-san?" Tamao asked in a surprised voice.

Ryofu looked around the circle at them. "If this means I could protect you all from death, then I want this," she elaborated.

"Well, when you put it *that* way," Hazuki smiled at her former teacher, "yeah, I'd be willing to try it, so long as we can avoid any unexpected fireworks."

"How does it work, though?" Kaname asked. "What's the difference between sending a 'spark' and doing what we're doing right now?"

"The trick," Chikaru explained, "is to split your *Souma* at the source. Just break a tiny piece of it off and hold it separate. I'll show you. Focus on the flow, and watch me."

Once she was convinced that she had everyone's inner attention, Chikaru separated a tiny companion star and held it a small distance from her source. "This is something that Hazuki-chan and I have been practicing for some time, and have begun teaching Tamao-chan as well. If I may ask the two of you to do the same, to show our guests?"

"You got it," Hazuki nodded, and Chikaru fancied she could feel part of the river split off into a lake, and a bit of the wind holding fast as a miniature dust devil.

"Huh," said Kaname, simply.

"This is something that took a lot of practice," Chikaru went on, "but if this idea appeals to you, we can work with you to…"

"Done," said Ryofu.

Chikaru stopped short at this single spoken word, and to her surprise, she sensed across the distance that Ryofu had indeed split herself, just like that. "Ren-san, did you already know how to do this?"

"No."

"Then how were you able to..?" Hazuki tried to ask, but could not finish the question.

"Because I knew it was possible," Ryofu said in reply.

For just a moment, Chikaru was taken aback: she was so used to being the experienced one in terms of *Souma* that it was easy to forget how long Ryofu had been living with it. Even if the great general had never studied her gift the way Chikaru herself had, her energy had spent over a millennium in that ageless body. Briefly she wondered if Ryofu might be far and away the most powerful of the five women seated on her bed.

"Well, that's no good," Kaname sighed. "I can't be the only one who can't do the trick. Give me a second…"

"Sometimes I just picture taking some of it out with a bucket," Hazuki suggested.

"A… bucket," Kaname repeated, deadpan. "You manipulate your mystic soul energy with a *bucket* ."

"Hey, we're both liquid. Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Now, now, let's let her concentrate," said Chikaru.

A long silence ensued while Kaname's face twisted in concentration, and her source wobbled a little from across the circle. Unfortunately, it seemed that the more she focused on this, the more sluggish the shared flow between them was becoming, and it was probably only a matter of time before she thought herself right out of the semi-trance. Just as Chikaru was about to suggest that they table this for another session, though, a small droplet of the Earth-blood Ryofu had described split off from the rest.

"Fine, I tried the bucket," Kaname growled.

"You're welcome," Hazuki chuckled.

"Kaname-san, Ren-san, that was amazing," said Tamao. "You both did it on your first try! It took me a *lot* longer."

"To be fair," Chikaru pointed out, "I think having this many of us together is helping to speed things along. There's a very powerful current connecting us right now, my dears, and I daresay we're all the better off for it."

"What do we do now?" Ryofu asked.

Another centering breath before Chikaru resumed her role. "Your smaller source still has an affinity for the part of the flow that originates from you. If you allow it, you'll find that you can let it slowly drift along the path of that energy, where it could eventually pass the boundary between you and another *Souma* -bearer, and become a guest in their own shell. Try moving just a tiny distance down that path, and get a feel for how easily you can control its movement. Eventually you'll find that you can take it all the way to the edge of yourself. Now, it's very important that we don't…"

Looking back at the event later, Chikaru could not be certain how it all started. Maybe Ryofu found it all too easy to follow that path, and made a beeline right into Hazuki's source. Maybe Kaname lost her grip and was literally carried away into Ryofu. For all she knew, it might have been herself, taking her expertise for granted just after she had explained to the others how different things felt with five of them in the circle.

Whatever it was, though, it was orders of magnitude more than what had happened between her and Hazuki the first time their sources had joined. What had been a pleasant current of energy became a typhoon that ripped each source from its individual shell, and as each one slammed violently into the next, the core of *Souma* between them grew brighter and wilder at an exponential rate.

All she could say later was that for a seemingly infinite moment, Minamoto Chikaru ceased to exist, having given herself completely to the sun that the five of them had created: a sun which grew

uncontrolled until it collapsed under its own mass and became a supernova, flinging their fleeting vestiges of self into the void.

4:41 pm

"Sister," Chikaru said quietly, "I know full well what the rumors have said about the three of us, but I promise you, I am not… sexually involved with them." She was skirting the edges of lying to a nun, and she knew it, but even as tired as she was, she felt that she had to try.

"Is that what you think this is about, Minamoto-kun?" the old woman asked in a chilling voice. "Something as trite as mere sex? You know very well of what I am speaking…"

12:33 am

The first-floor hallway of Strawberry Hall's Lulim wing was quiet, and had been so for several hours now: it was well after lights-out, and any activity such as sneaking from room to room had long been put to bed, literally and figuratively.

Presently, from the cracks around one of the doors to a student room, a brilliant green issued forth, momentarily casting strange shadows along the length of the hall, but not breaking the silence of the late hour.

The light lasted for several seconds, then faded, and for a time the night resumed its customary peace.

At least, it did so before Kaname threw the door open from inside and stalked out into the hallway, drenched with sweat and wearing an expression of unbridled fury. "Never again, you hear me? You can keep this sh*t to yourselves, 'cause I don't want *any* part of it!"

Hazuki emerged from the room a moment later, hurriedly closing the door behind her and pursuing the other woman down the hallway. "Dammit, Kaname, keep it down!" she hissed.

"Keep it down?" Kaname repeated. "That's all you've got to say to me after *that?!* Do you have any goddamn idea what you just *did* to me?!"

"It was an accident!"

"An accident?" Kaname fired back, but at least this time she lowered her voice to a furious growl. "You just permanently *ruined* my sex life, and you're talking about it being an *accident?* "

"What the hell are you even *talking* about?"

By this time they had reached the stairs, and Kaname continued storming up them without breaking stride. "Oh, sure, we're just gonna *meditate*, it's not like we're gonna show you something you and your mere mortal girlfriend will *never* be able to do. It's not like we're gonna force-feed you a little taste of what *we* probably get every day."

Hazuki finally caught up with her on the landing, grabbed her by the shoulder, and spun her around. "That was *not* what this was about, and you *know* it!"

"Oh, do I?" Kaname said with a wild smile, leaning in uncomfortably close to say the next in a quiet, dangerous voice. "You sure about that? You sure this wasn't some kind of lesson for evil rapey girl? Remind her what it's like to have something forced on *her* for a change?"

Hazuki stood her ground. "You know me better than that."

"You know what all the self-help books say to rape victims?" Kaname went on as though she had not heard. "They tell you that a rapist can take your body, but that they can't touch your mind and your spirit

unless you let them. I guess only your so-called *friends* can do that part!"

"That wasn't…" Hazuki started to say, but she could not manage any more because Kaname had grabbed her by the back of the head and mashed their lips together in a sloppy, furious kiss that sparked almost painfully with *Souma*…

… and which lasted for barely a second before Hazuki roughly shoved her away, reared back with one hand and delivered a ringing slap that echoed up and down the stairs.

Then, for a long while, there was only silence once more as Kaname raised her hand to her cheek and touched it gingerly. She looked back at Hazuki, and they held one another's gaze for the space of several long breaths.

Gradually, the manic fury faded from Kaname's expression, and she gave Hazuki a much more familiar smirk. "Yeah… I think I liked the slap better."

That said, she continued up the stairs, and this time Hazuki did not follow her. Instead, she retraced her steps back to Chikaru's room and let herself back in.

"Hazuki-chan," Tamao said quietly, looking up blearily from her seat on the bed. "Is Kaname-san okay?"

"She f*cking kissed me," Hazuki said incredulously, before she could think better of it.

To her surprise, Tamao only nodded. "I suppose I can't blame her. For a minute there, I wanted to kiss every single one of you." She then looked over at Ryofu, who was also still on the bed, lying in an almost fetal position, her eyes wide and unblinking. "Ren-san won't answer me, but… somehow it feels like it would be a bad idea to touch her."

"Definitely not just yet," said Hazuki, remembering how uncharacteristically wild the *Souma* had been between her and Chikaru when this had happened months before. She put herself into the line of Ryofu's sightless gaze, hoping to find some recognition in those eyes. "Ren, it's okay. It's over."

"Hazuki-chan, what happened?" Tamao asked. "I… feel like I have all these memories that aren't mine, but when I try to focus on one of them, it just… dissipates."

"Yeah, that'll sort itself out," Hazuki nodded, trying to play the role of the reassuring veteran in spite of herself. "We're probably going to have some weird dreams for a few days, though."

"It's so strange, though, like I'm watching the world through someone else's eyes, and…" Tamao paused, and her eyes went wide. "Hazuki-chan, you…"

"What is it?"

Tamao's face twisted through several emotions, starting with horror and eventually ending up at a sort of stunned amazement. "Naoko-sama… she tried to… seduce you, Hazuki-chan?"

"What?" Hazuki gasped.

"And… you didn't let her…" Tamao breathed.

Hazuki wanted to protest, and say that Eve had done no such thing, but then a memory clicked into place: their last visit to the Great Library, when she had asked Eve to suggest a boon, and Eve had taken them back to that last night together… "Oh God, she did…" she whispered.

"You didn't remember," said Tamao, as a statement rather than a question.

"I didn't," Hazuki said slowly. Not only had she not remembered, but she remembered *not* remembering, as much sense as *that* made. "Obviously she didn't want me to."

"I'm sorry, Hazuki-chan," Tamao whispered.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. You shouldn't have had to see that." She could feel an afterimage of her nearly hysterical reaction to Eve's "suggestion," but it was weirdly distant now, almost as though it had been a scene in a movie she'd watched.

For the first time since the circle was broken, Tamao managed a smile, albeit a shaky one. "No, Hazuki-chan, I mean… I'm sorry I ever… doubted you."

Even in her bewildered state, Hazuki's heart melted at these words, and she very carefully took Tamao in her arms, making sure to allow no actual skin contact. "I'm sorry I ever gave you reason."

They held each other for a moment, and then Hazuki had a sudden realization. "Wait, where's Chikaru?"

As if in reply, the door to the bathroom opened, and Chikaru emerged, wiping her face with a washcloth. "That… wasn't supposed to happen," she said in a vague, distant voice.

"Too much, too soon?" Hazuki asked.

"Probably," Chikaru agreed, leaning heavily against her desk. "Oh, my dear ones… what have I done to you?"

"Look, everyone's going to be okay," Hazuki said hotly. "Last time *you* told *me* not to feel guilty about this, Chikaru, and now it's my turn to say the same to you."

Chikaru pointed to indicate the still-catatonic Ryofu. "Does she look okay to you?"

"She's a survivor. As soon as the *Souma* cools down, we'll help her."

"Even then, what about everyone else?" Chikaru asked, slicking her sweat-matted hair back from her face.

"Everyone else?" Tamao repeated.

"What *about* everyone else?" Hazuki asked.

Chikaru gave them an almost haunted look. "The last time this happened, it had a ripple effect on the rest of the dormitory. How much bigger might that ripple have been just now?"

Hazuki had no quick rebuttal for this. "Well… hopefully we just gave everyone some really nice dreams, and nothing more."

"I shouldn't have allowed this," Chikaru whispered, shaking her head ruefully. "It was stupid of me to suggest something new like that on our first time all together. What was I even thinking?"

"You were trying to help us," Tamao assured her, "like you always do."

At that moment, Ryofu gave a sudden, violent shudder, making the other three gasp simultaneously in surprise. Before anyone could move to help her, though, Ryofu painstakingly pushed herself up to a semi-seated position.

"Ren, are you okay?" Hazuki asked, again trying to position herself in the other woman's line of sight.

Ryofu blinked at her a few times, and then her eyes seemed to finally focus. She gave a tiny shake of the head. "Home…" she whispered.

"Do you want me to get you back to your cottage?" Hazuki went on, gingerly reaching to place her hands on Ryofu's shoulders, making sure to keep them over the fabric of her shirt.

Another couple of blinks, and then Ryofu nodded once.

Hazuki gave her the best smile she could manage. "Okay, let's get you on your feet. You can lean on me; just try not to make any skin contact yet. Tamao-chan, can you give me a hand?"

Tamao shakily rose from her own seated position, and together they helped Ryofu off the bed. The older woman's legs were a bit wobbly, so Hazuki carefully placed one arm around her back to help keep her upright. "It's okay, Ren. Once we're clear of the dorm I can carry you the rest of the way."

"I can… walk…" Ryofu managed, though her legs seemed to think otherwise, as it was all Hazuki could do to keep her from collapsing.

"Do you want to wait a bit until you get your strength back, Ren-san?" Tamao asked.

Ryofu shook her head. "Take me home," she croaked. "Please."

"I'll get you there, Ren, don't worry," Hazuki assured her. "Tamao-chan, could you get the door?"

Tamao nodded and went to open the door, but Hazuki found herself unable to exit, as someone was standing on the other side.

"What," asked Sister Mizue, "is the meaning of this?"

4:42 pm

"Imagine, if you will, how the scene appeared to my eyes. You, Suzumi-kun, Azuma-kun, and *a member of the campus staff*… in your dormitory, long past curfew, with the entire room smelling of sweat and arousal?"

"Sister, I promise you, we weren't doing anything sexual…"

"Irrelevant," Mizue snapped. "Minamoto-kun, I have willingly overlooked a number of lesser dormitory violations of late, but this

has gone too far. As it stands, Fengxian-san will likely be put on notice, if not fired outright."

"But… Fengxian-san was only there because she's one of Hazuki's oldest friends! It wasn't because of…"

" *May I remind you,"* the Sister said in a raised voice, "that not even *your mother* is allowed in your dormitory room after curfew, either in her role as your parent or as an administrator of one of these academies? For an adult, *particularly* a member of the staff, to be in the room of a boarder in the dead of night is simply *unconscionable* ."

"I'm the one who invited her," Chikaru whispered. "You're right, I should have known better. Please don't punish her."

"That will not be up to me, Minamoto-kun. You know very well that actions have ramifications, often farther-reaching than you would ever expect…"

12:33 am

Afterward, Shin was not sure which had awakened him: the cry from the guest room, or Miyuki throwing back the covers and practically sprinting out of the bed. "Kaori!"

Whichever it had been, he was wide awake now, so he scrambled to his feet and followed his wife out of the bedroom, down the hall and to the room currently occupied by "Akiko." (This was not the first time Miyuki had slipped up and referred to the girl as Kaori, which Shin presumed to be her real name. He had made up his mind not to pursue the issue any further than that, however.)

When he arrived, he was expecting to see Miyuki comforting the girl after a nightmare. What he actually found, though, was something a bit more… *entertaining* .

Kaori, eyes still closed, was clinging to Miyuki and kissing her soundly and repeatedly, even as his wife tried to dodge the amorous assault. "Kaori, wake up! Miyuki shouted, trying to hold the girl steady. "Wake - mmph! Stop that, you need to - mmph!"

With a strength Shin would not have expected the younger girl to possess, Kaori wrestled Miyuki onto her back, then continued kissing her exposed neck while her blindly groping hands sought to clumsily undress her.

"Should I, um, leave you two alone for a bit?" Shin asked, unable to keep the humor from his voice.

"She has… no idea… what she's doing," Miyuki grunted, even as Kaori tore at the front of her pajamas, popping several buttons.

"I don't know, looks to me like she knows *exactly* what she's doing," Shin commented as Kaori buried her face between Miyuki's breasts and went on kissing.

Miyuki wrapped both arms around Kaori then and bodily heaved herself to her feet, managing to keep herself upright in spite of the smaller girl having wrapped all four limbs around her. "Either help me or get out of my way," she growled, as Kaori resumed kissing and even lightly gnawing on her collarbone.

"What can I do?" Shin asked, letting the humor slide for now.

"Open the bathroom door. And stay back."

Shin complied, opening the door to the attached bathroom and then stepping aside as Miyuki carried the other girl inside. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Someone's in desperate need of a wake-up shower," Miyuki called back to him.

"Um, you know, at this time of night it might take the water a little time to…"

There was the sound of a shower-head coming to life, accompanied by a blood-curdling shriek from Kaori.

"… warm up…" Shin finished.

4:46 pm

Chikaru took a few breaths, trying to regain her focus. "Sister… there is nothing sinful or evil about what we're doing together. In a lot of ways it's an extension of the same practices martial artists use."

The Sister stared at her for a long while. "I never said anything about your actions being *sinful*, Minamoto-kun, much less *evil* . Unlike many so-called followers of Christ, I have actually *read* the Holy Bible, and I know full well that I am not to place such judgment: only God shall be the arbiter of such things."

There was the tiniest flicker in the woman's expression, which was something that Chikaru had *never* seen. "However, along with being Catholic, I am also Japanese, and the spirituality of these islands will continue to be part of my heritage and my culture. I am aware of the practices of which you speak… and many others. Do not forget, Minamoto-kun, that your sister was one of my boarders as well."

Chikaru was nothing short of stunned. How much did the Sister truly know?

"Rather than discuss with you the nature of good versus evil," Mizue continued, "perhaps we should discuss simple cause and effect? Or do you believe that what happened to Byakudan-kun this morning was merely a coincidence?"

"No," said Chikaru, hanging her head. "No, I'm sure it wasn't…"

7:35 am

By the time Sayuri led Chikaru to the second-floor hallway of the Lulim wing, a small crowd of curious girls had gathered around the closed door of Kagome's room, whispering among themselves. "You're sure she's inside?" Chikaru asked.

"Remon-chan said she heard crying from inside, but she won't answer anyone's knocking. I've got Ayame looking for either her roommate or the Sister."

"The Sister will be preparing for Mass," Chikaru said mostly to herself. Just as well, as she did not relish the idea of seeing Sister Mizue again so soon after this past night's activities…

As politely as her current exhaustion would allow, Chikaru nudged her way through the crowd until she found Remon at the door itself, pressing her ear against the wood. "Oh, thank goodness you're here, Chikaru-onee-sama," the green-haired girl sighed. "I came to wake Kagome-chan for breakfast, but she won't come out, and when I told her it was me she just started crying more, and it sounds like she's stopped for now, but…"

"Thank you, Remon-chan," Chikaru assured her, easing her away from the door before giving it a listen herself. There was indeed no sound from within, so she took a step back and knocked three times. "Kagome-chan? It's me, sweetheart. Could you let me in, please?"

Seconds passed with not so much as a peep from within, so Chikaru knocked again. "Kagome-chan? May I come in?"

At this point, Ayame arrived with Kagome's roommate in tow. "Found her," the Lulim secretary reported.

"Thank you," Chikaru nodded to her assistant, then turned to the nervous-looking second-year accompanying her. "Good morning, Kaede-chan. I'll need to ask you to unlock the door for me, please."

"Of- of course, onee-sama," Kaede bowed, looking perhaps more nervous than the situation called for.

"Before you do, though," Chikaru went on, placing a steadying hand on the girl's arm, "did you notice anything strange about Kagome-chan this morning?"

Kaede's face flushed, and she looked helplessly from side to side, noting the others present. "Onee-sama, I…" she managed.

Chikaru looked around the small gathering of girls, and while she did not glare, per se, it had the intended effect of making everyone take a few steps back.

"What did you see, Kaede-chan?" Chikaru asked, leaning closer and turning her face slightly to the side, offering her ear.

Kaede leaned forward and replied in a tremulous whisper. "Um… please don't be angry, onee-sama, but… I wasn't in our room last night…"

"Understood," Chikaru nodded, desperately hoping that Kaede had simply been having tea and a sleepover with her friends. She then raised her voice slightly to be sure the others present would hear her. "You can tell me the rest of what you saw later, then. For now, I would be much obliged if you would unlock the door for us."

Kaede immediately complied, nervously fishing her keys out of her pocket to do so. Chikaru stepped back to give the girl some space, and found herself standing next to Remon.

"Maybe she had a nightmare?" the third-year girl wondered aloud. "It would've had to have been a bad one, though."

"That's what I'm worried about," Chikaru said softly. She then took a look around, for the first time recognizing the conspicuous absence. "Where's Kizuna-chan?"

Remon looked very uncomfortable for a moment, then tried with little success to cover it up. "Um… I think she got up early today. I haven't seen her all morning."

There was something almost desolate in Remon's voice, and Chikaru felt her heart drop. *No, not them. Please, not them…*

Kaede finished with the door, then stepped back. "It's open, onee-sama."

"Thank you," Chikaru said with a strained smile, then addressed the group. "I'm going to go in alone. Remon-chan, Kaede-chan, Sayuri-chan, please wait here and come if I call for you. Ayame-chan, would you be a dear and remind everyone else how to get to the dining hall?"

"You heard her," Ayame said. "Come on, everyone, your onee-sama's on the job."

As Ayame continued shooing the crowd away, Chikaru took a deep breath in an attempt to center herself, then opened the door and stepped into the darkened room.

Once her eyes adjusted to the dimness, Chikaru noticed that Kagome's bed was a mess, with most of the covers pulled into the corner between the headboard and the wall, and there was a familiar teddy bear sitting in front of the huddle of fabric.

"Kagome-chan?" Chikaru called softly.

There was a hint of movement from within the covers, and then two small hands grasped the bear and twitched it back and forth. "Kagome-chan isn't here," came a tiny, shaking voice. "Please go away."

"Oh, I see," said Chikaru, trying to keep her voice level and reassuring. "Hello there, Percival. Dear me, I haven't spoken with *you* in a while. Did Kagome-chan have a nightmare?"

"You should go away," 'Percival' replied, wiggling a little as he spoke.

"But I'm worried about Kagome-chan," Chikaru replied, easing herself onto the mattress to face her unexpected interlocutor. "Remon-chan is here, you know. She's worried too. Can you tell me what happened, Percival?"

"Kagome-chan… isn't here."

Slowly, gingerly, Chikaru reached to lay her palm over one of the hands grasping Percival, but the moment she made contact, both hands instantly retreated back into the covers, and Kagome let out a shriek of purest terror. " *Noooo! Don't touch, don't touch! Please, Papa, no more!* ***No more!*** "

"Kagome!" Chikaru shouted. " *Kagome!"*

The pile of covers thrashed behind Percival as Kagome kicked and squirmed, as though trying to burrow into the wall behind her. " *Don't hurt Kagome-chan anymore, Papa,* ***please!*** "

Chikaru wanted nothing more than to reach out and hold the girl, but she hesitated, fearful that this would only make it worse. "Kagome, *I'm not him!* " she called, only now feeling the horrifying implications of her junior's words sink in. "It's Chikaru, sweetheart, it's your nee-san Chikaru! It's me!"

"Onee-sama?! *Onee-sama, don't let him hurt Kagome-chan!* "

"I won't!" cried Chikaru. "I promise you, Kagome, as long as I draw breath, he will *never* hurt you again! Do you hear me, Kagome? I'll protect you, *I promise!* "

" *Onee-sama!"* Kagome wailed, suddenly springing out from under the covers and throwing herself into Chikaru's arms. " *Don't make Kagome-chan go back there! Kagome-chan doesn't ever want to go back!"*

"Shhh, you don't have to, sweetheart. We'll find a way, believe me." Chikaru held the trembling girl against her, whispering assurances as best she could.

"Chikaru, do you want me to get the Sister?" said a quiet voice. When Chikaru looked back she saw the other three standing at the doorway, having apparently followed her in once the screaming started. Remon was ashen and stunned, Kaede looked like she was on the verge of throwing up, and Sayuri, the one who had spoken, held an expression which hinted that she was seriously contemplating murder.

"Please," Chikaru nodded, realizing that this was something which she, for all her vaunted reputation as Astraea's unofficial therapist, was not going to be able to handle alone.

4:48 pm

"What will happen to Kagome now?" Chikaru whispered. "I… want to help in any way I can."

"For now, she is effectively a ward of the Church. The prefectural police have been notified, and she will be interviewed tomorrow to determine the nature and extent of her abuse. As for what you can do to help, Byakudan-kun has asked that you be present for that interview. I am certain the police will also wish to question you about this morning."

"Of course. But… what will happen after that?"

The Sister paused to take a seat at her desk, casting a brief look at a small stack of paperwork sitting close by. "There are procedures and legal hurdles far too extensive to name here and now. However, in my decades as administrator of the *Ichigo-Sha*, Byakudan-kun is sadly not the first abused child to walk these halls. This is an unpleasant road, but one which has been traveled before, and if this was truly something more than a simple nightmare… as I think you

and I both know it was… then she will be returned to her family over my dead body."

There was steel in the old woman's eyes, and Chikaru found herself grateful for it, even knowing that it would soon turn upon her again. "Thank you, Sister. I'll do anything I can for her."

"Very well. As heartless as it feels to say so, perhaps then some good may yet come of this day."

"I hope so," Chikaru whispered.

Mizue leaned back in her chair, her eyes never leaving her boarder. "Again, Minamoto-kun, we come to the simple notion of cause and effect. You see… your… *practices*, as you call them, are truly none of my concern, at least in my role as a woman of God."

Chikaru blinked in shock. "They're… they're not?"

"They are indeed not." She then narrowed her eyes. "However, my role as the administrator of this dormitory is another matter entirely. As I said, there is much that I have willingly overlooked to date, but when your actions begin to affect the students under my charge, it very much *becomes* my concern. Surely you must recognize this."

Again, Chikaru could only bow her head. "Yes, Sister."

"You may tell me that there was nothing *wrong* about your actions, Minamoto-kun, but can you look me in the eye and tell me that they have not had an effect on the other residents of this dormitory?"

"No, Sister… I can't…"

1:41 pm

From the moment Kizuna said that she really needed to talk to her, Chikaru knew that this was going to be difficult. When Kizuna

eschewed her customary cuddle-talk for tea around the small table in Chikaru's dorm room, that was even more indication.

When they were midway through their third cup without the requested talk actually beginning, Chikaru finally brought herself to nudge things forward, as much as she dreaded what might come of it. "Can you tell me what brings you here, Kizuna-chan?"

Kizuna hid behind her tea for a few breaths, then set the cup down and closed her eyes. "Something happened with me and Remon-chan last night."

"Is it something you need to talk about?" *Please no, please no…*

"I… I'm just… so confused, Chikaru-onee-sama. It's… really personal stuff. I hope that's okay."

"Say what you need to say, Kizuna-chan," Chikaru assured her. She was certain she did not want to hear this, but that mattered little at this point.

"Okay," Kizuna sighed. "So. Um, I don't know how aware of it you are, but… Remon-chan and I have been… fooling around a little sometimes lately. It's… it's never been anything *major*, though. I mean… we kiss a little, and we cuddle a lot, and sometimes we feel each other's boobs and stuff, but… it's always been… you know, just light and fun."

"Light and fun," Chikaru repeated, feeling the yawning abyss slowly opening beneath her feet.

Kizuna paused, then continued with obvious difficulty. "Well, last night I was in Remon-chan's bed… 'cause we sleep in the same bed sometimes… and I don't remember what I was dreaming, but I woke up suddenly, and I was just drenched in sweat. I must have woke Remon-chan too, though, because she was blinking at me and looked like she'd just been asleep too, and then…"

"And then..?" *No, no, no…*

"And then…" Kizuna paused to swallow hard, "we just stared at each other for a little while, and I… just suddenly wanted to kiss her. I mean, *really* kiss her *seriously*, not the playing around like we used to do. I… guess she wanted the same thing, because we just… really started going at it, and for a while I just felt like I was *flying*…"

"I see," Chikaru said quietly.

"After that… it started to get even *more* serious. Remon-chan asked if she could take my shirt off, and… I ended up taking it off almost before she finished asking, and… she started to kiss me… *there*, too, and… it was *way* more intense than anything we'd ever done before." Here, Kizuna trailed off and looked away, absently reaching to take her teacup in her hands again.

"Was that as far as it went, then?" Chikaru asked. *Please let that be as far as it went. Please…*

"Well… no," Kizuna said at last. "Remon-chan said she wanted to see the rest of me too, and… so I… got the rest of the way naked…"

"Did you feel pressured?" Chikaru asked, because she felt that she had to. Not that she would expect that of Remon, but…

"Pressured? No, no, Remon-chan *asked* for everything, and kept saying that it was okay if I said no, but I… just felt so caught up in it that I let her, and then she started to kiss me… even *lower*… and… she started doing things with…" Kizuna looked down, her face on fire.

"I understand, Kizuna-chan," said Chikaru, stopping her before she could go further with the description.

"It was… so *intense*…" Kizuna said in a near-whisper. "I mean, I never knew *anything* could feel like that. I just felt like my whole body was going to burst wide open, but it just kept getting more and

more… *full*, and… in the movies the girl always just gives a little 'ahh' and it's over, but… I had to hold a pillow over my face because I was *screaming*, and I was afraid I was gonna wake the whole dorm before it was over."

Chikaru stared into her tea, finding herself utterly at a loss for words.

"Then after it was… well, *over*… I was just shaking and my heart was still beating so fast I thought it might pop right out, and… Remon-chan just came up and held me and told me I was beautiful, and that she felt so lucky…"

Even in the midst of all this, Chikaru smiled inwardly. Perhaps Remon was even more a hopeless romantic than she let on.

When Kizuna spoke next, her voice had begun to tighten slightly. "But… after that, once I calmed down more, I… guess I figured it was my turn. Remon-chan didn't ask me to, and she didn't look like she expected it of me or anything like that, but… fair's fair, right? So I started kissing her again, and we got her out of her pajamas, and she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before, but…"

"What happened, Kizuna-chan?" Chikaru asked, her voice monotone. In truth, she had a strong feeling she already knew what was coming next.

"Well, we got her pants off," Kizuna said, her voice constricting further, "and I… got into place, and… there it… I mean, there *she* was… right in front of me, and… I completely *froze* ."

"What did you do?"

"That's just it! It wasn't what I *did*, it was what I *didn't* do!" Kizuna said with a visible shiver. "I mean, I knew what I was *supposed to* do, more or less, and Remon-chan had just done it to *me*, but… I just couldn't *bring* myself to! I… *froze!* And then Remon-chan asked me if I was okay, and I started crying, and she just grabbed me and held

me and said it was okay and that she understood, and somehow that just made it *worse*, and…"

Kizuna was crying again at the memory, so Chikaru found her a tissue and waited for her to dry her eyes before she continued.

"I… haven't talked to her since," she whispered. "I don't understand it, onee-sama. I *love* Remon-chan. Sometimes I think about *marrying* her, and other times I feel like we're *already* married. Why… why couldn't I do this for her?"

For her…

Chikaru took a few slow breaths. The truth of the matter was that the content of this conversation was nothing new to her: she had, over the years, heard the confessions of more than a few other girls telling her about one confused fumbling attempt at lovemaking or another.

But none of them had been Kizuna or Remon.

"Kizuna-chan," Chikaru said carefully, "you're probably not going to like what I'm going to tell you."

"Are you mad at me, onee-sama?" Kizuna asked tremulously.

"Not at all, my dear. I'm in no position to be angry, and certainly not with you. That being said, I can't sugar-coat this and still be as honest with you as I need to be."

Kizuna nodded, then looked down into her teacup. "Okay."

One last selfish deep breath, and then Chikaru leveled her gaze at the younger girl. "Kizuna-chan, has it ever occurred to you… that you might not be gay?"

Eyes like saucers, Kizuna looked up at her again. " *What?!"* she asked in almost a choked hiss. "What are you *talking* about?"

"I'm only asking a question, Kizuna-chan."

Kizuna opened and closed her mouth a few times, looking like a literal fish out of water. "But… *of course* I am! I mean, I love Remon-chan, right?"

"Of course you do: I've never doubted that. But… based on what you just told me, are you sure you're attracted to her sexually?"

For a moment, Kizuna could only stare at her senpai in horror, but then she gave a defiant frown. "But I love boobs. I mean, I *really* love boobs a *lot* ."

Chikaru closed her eyes and sighed, hoping she did not sound as exasperated as she felt. "Yes, *of course* you do, because *you're a mammal* . It's literally hard-wired into your genetic code to have a positive outlook toward breasts. Depending on how you were raised, it's possible that some of your earliest memories were of breasts being the best and sometimes only source of comfort in a terrifying new world. That does *not* necessarily make you a lesbian."

"But…" Kizuna was beginning to cry again, and Chikaru could tell that her words were hitting home, as much as she hated herself for it. "But… onee-sama, I *have* to be! I mean…"

"No, you don't," Chikaru said softly. "Perhaps you are and perhaps you aren't, but it's not a given, even here on this hill. Even taking that aside, though, what happened to you last night was perfectly understandable, regardless of your sexuality. You're… fifteen, right?"

Kizuna looked away again. "Fourteen," she said in a tiny voice.

"Nearly fifteen, though?"

"My birthday was in April. You… threw me a party."

"So I did," Chikaru sighed. "I'm sorry, Kizuna-chan, I'm not at my best today either, I'm afraid."

"It's okay."

"My point still stands, though. First times are inherently scary, and… Kizuna-chan, forgive this question, but have you ever… stimulated yourself to climax?" She could not bring herself to use the actual term, and Hazuki's borrowed metaphor about stairs seemed inappropriate, all things considered.

Kizuna shook her head. "The nuns say it's bad."

Of course. Of all the things to actually be Catholic about, she chooses this one…

"Then you had no idea what you were in for," Chikaru went on. "My sweet, whether or not you're gay, I just don't think you were *ready* ."

Kizuna found her tissue and wiped her eyes again. "When… when were *you* ready, onee-sama? I mean… how old were you?"

Now it was Chikaru who was unable to meet the other girl's eyes. "Well, let's see," she said quietly. "About… seventeen and a half years… and still counting."

There was a long silence, broken at last when Kizuna gasped softly. "You mean..?"

"Yes," Chikaru nodded.

"But… but… Hazuki-senpai and Tamao-senpai..?"

"I haven't so much as kissed them," Chikaru said tiredly. "A lot of cuddling, like you said… a little flirting and fondling here and there… but that's as far as I've been with either of them."

Here, Chikaru looked up again, to see that Kizuna appeared almost nauseated as the implications began to sink in. *You officially have more experience than your onee-sama, Kizuna-chan* .

"I… didn't know," Kizuna said weakly.

"No, you didn't," Chikaru sighed. "And for that, my sweet, I owe you my deepest apologies."

Kizuna blinked a few times, a note of confusion crossing her stunned expression. "But… what? Why?"

"Everyone was so willing to believe that the three of us were some sort of sexual hurricane," said Chikaru. "For my part, I went on letting everyone believe it, because it amused me to hear the stories everyone came up with. It never once occurred to me that… it might set a bad example for my juniors to let them think that *this* was the truth."

Now tears were slowly falling from her eyes as well, but she was too tired to wipe them away. "You yourself once said that the three of us were an inspiration to you, Kizuna-chan, but I wonder now if we inspired you for all the wrong reasons. If you had known that your onee-sama was not as worldly as you thought… perhaps you wouldn't have been in such a hurry…"

Nothing more was said, and eventually Kizuna stood, bowed shakily, and showed herself out, leaving Chikaru to slowly and mechanically clear the tea table.

4:52 pm

"Minamoto-kun," the Sister said over steepled fingers, "you are for the third year running the student council president of one of the three Astraea schools. It is a commonly held belief that you could have won the last Étoile-sen regardless of your choice of partner. Your skill as an actress, your reputation as a wise counsel, your more recent public forays into the martial arts… all of these have combined to create a truly beloved figure amongst the attendees of these schools, and particularly the residents of this dormitory."

"Thank you, Sister," Chikaru whispered.

"I am reminded, however, of a conversation I had with Kojima-sensei some months ago, regarding your friend Azuma-kun."

This, finally, got Chikaru to look up and meet the nun's eyes. "What *about* Hazuki?"

"Kojima-sensei was concerned about the extent of Azuma-kun's skill with a sword, not for the sake of the girl herself, but for the sake of younger, less experienced students who would seek to emulate her, and thereby endanger themselves."

Chikaru nodded, remembering the meeting with the sensei after the sparring accident which could have led to Hazuki's death. She could tell where the Sister was going with this, so she kept quiet.

"You, Minamoto-kun, are in a similar position. Your level of fame on these grounds, while more subtle than that of the Étoile, is unquestioned. And now, that fame has come to include a perceived relationship with a respected former Étoile candidate and a transfer student with a troubled past and an uncanny knack for courting controversy. Whether or not you have engaged in physical intimacy with them is irrelevant: the simple truth is that one of the most respected and beloved girls to walk these halls is believed to be in an exciting, forbidden relationship, taboo not merely for the gender of its participants, but for their number as well."

A misgiving seized Chikaru's heart. Surely the Sister was not suggesting that she…

"There are *children* who attend these schools, Minamoto-kun, some of them barely taking their first steps into adolescence. Whether you like it or not, you are setting an example for them all."

"I realize that, Sister," Chikaru whispered. *Now more than ever.*

Mizue let out a long breath and folded her hands atop her desk. "Mind that your future actions take this into account. You are on

level-one dormitory probation due to the presence of Fengxian-san in your room after curfew. I trust that it will not happen again."

"Of course not, Sister," Chikaru nodded. But why had she only mentioned Ryofu?

"This has been a troubling and exhausting day, Minamoto-kun. See to it that there is not cause for another of its like. You are dismissed."

Chikaru stood, numbly shocked that the meeting had ended so abruptly, and with what was effectively a slap on the wrist. "Is that… really *all*, Sister?"

"In my role as administrator of this dormitory, that is the level of punishment appropriate to the violation, yes." The Sister then narrowed her eyes at her. "Though knowing you as I do, I daresay it will not be the only punishment you endure."

There was a long silence as Chikaru chewed on these words, and then she bowed and stepped toward the door. Before she could open it, though, she stopped. There was something she had to know, even if it was against her better judgment to ask. "Sister, may I ask one more thing?"

"You may."

"I… apologize if this question is inappropriate. I'm well aware of the position of the Catholic Church, but… do you personally disapprove of homosexuality?"

For a long time, there was no answer, and when Chikaru finally brought herself to look back, she saw the Sister studying her very carefully.

"In the time of my youth," the Sister said at last, "there were… many reasons why a young woman might decide to enter the service of the church, Minamoto-kun. Many reasons indeed…"

There was a fraction of an instant in which she looked very old and very tired, but then it was gone. Chikaru bowed again, then let herself out of the office.

6:10 pm

Dinner was a subdued affair, and to Chikaru's disquiet, she was certain she heard several whispers about Kagome over the course of the meal, so it appeared the rumor mill was already hard at work. Though she did not suspect that Remon or Sayuri or Kaede would have said anything about what they had witnessed, it was certainly possible that Kagome's screams had carried further, or that someone had seen her being escorted from the dormitory by the nuns. The lack of her presence at the evening meal certainly did not help.

She noted that Remon and Kizuna were sitting together, though they looked supremely uncomfortable, and did not seem to be speaking to one another beyond requests to pass the salt.

For that matter, "uncomfortable" seemed to be the reigning mood, and after a while Chikaru had to focus on her plate, as looking around at the other students only served to make her wonder how many more Kizunas and Remons might be among them. How many had been driven to something more than vivid dreams? How many had taken steps they were not ready for?

Once the meal was over, as they did every night, Tamao and Hazuki waited for her in the hallway, then accompanied her to the Lulim wing of the dormitory, though this time there were no held hands or snippets of pleasant after-dinner conversation. Chikaru let the three of them into her room and immediately went to put water in her electric kettle. When she returned from the bathroom, she saw the two women she loved more than life itself standing uncomfortably before her. Any other night, they would have been sitting on her bed by now, inviting her into the cuddle.

The kettle quickly boiled, and she went about the business of making tea while her dear ones knelt at the tea table. They drank together in silence, much as Chikaru had done with Kizuna hours before.

This time, again, Chikaru broke the heavy silence. "Is Ryofu okay?"

"I saw her after Mass," Hazuki nodded. "It's hard to tell with her sometimes, but I think she's handling it pretty well. A little shaken, maybe, but she's not upset with anyone."

I heard someone say that she might get fired for this," Tamao added, "but then I also heard Amane-sama say that she'd do everything in her power to keep that from happening."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," said Chikaru. "I should have…"

"Don't," Hazuki interrupted her. "Seriously, don't. We all did this together, Chikaru."

Tamao gave a quick nod. "Nagisa-chan was with me when I heard that being said, and then at dinner she told me that Shizuma is already offering to hire Ren-san as a groundskeeper at their vacation house if she loses her job here."

Chikaru managed a small, mostly genuine smile. "Please give my thanks to both of them. How about Kaname?"

Hazuki and Tamao exchanged glances. "I saw her before dinner," said Tamao. "She apologized to me for kissing Hazuki-chan."

"Note that she didn't apologize to *me*," Hazuki put in.

"But… she also said that she wasn't in any hurry to try meditating with us again in the future."

"Quite understandable," Chikaru sighed.

"She… also asked me if the rumors about Kagome-chan were true," Tamao said then, her face twisting with obvious discomfort. "I…

didn't know what to tell her."

Chikaru tried to set down her teacup, but her hands had begun to shake, causing it to spill over onto its saucer. "You know, it all makes so much sense now," she quavered, not certain where the words were coming from, but finding herself unable to stop them. "Why she hid behind Percival, and used him to make physical contact with people. Why having her hold your hand felt like she was giving you a tiny gift. Why she never grew out of calling herself Kagome-chan. All this time, I thought maybe it was some form of autism. Why didn't I see it for what it was? I'm supposed to be the wise counsel, and I couldn't see what was right in front of me…"

There was a hand on her left shoulder, and another gently grasping her right arm, as her two beloved friends came around the sides of the table to comfort her. For a few moments, Chikaru wanted to just collapse against them and let them do just that, but she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be able to say to them what needed to be said.

"We… need to stop spending the night here together," she managed.

Dead silence.

"Well, I sort of figured that we'd need to lay low for a while, yeah," Hazuki said at length. "Sister Mizue will probably be keeping a close eye on us for a couple weeks, at least. Once we're off probation, though…"

"I don't just mean because of that," said Chikaru flatly. "I just think… it would be best for me to be alone."

"Chikaru…" Tamao said in a tiny voice, "are you… breaking up with us?"

She shook her head, knowing full well that she could not be *that* strong. "No, my sweet. I think I'd sooner tear out my own heart."

"Then why..?" Hazuki asked.

"Well, there *are* practical reasons," Chikaru sighed. "Apart from not wishing to cause any more trouble with the Sister, there is the very real fact that my entire life is soon to be consumed by a light opera as it speeds toward the opening of the curtain. I will have rehearsals to run with the orchestra, lessons to give to anyone who might be falling behind, endless complicated costumes to sew… I'm going to need time and space for that."

"Well, that's understandable," said Hazuki, "but…"

"It might also do the two of you some good to have some time together where it *is* just the two of you," Chikaru said over her, squeezing her eyes shut. "My loves, I *so* wish I could tell you differently, but if last night's events convinced me of anything, it's that I can't keep trying to create a desire that isn't there! Look at the result!"

"But… last night was an accident!" Hazuki objected. "And anyway, what does that have to do with… with how you feel about us? That wasn't what last night was even about!"

"You were trying to do something to help us all," Tamao said, echoing her words from the previous night. "Like you always do."

"Yes, that's what I told myself," Chikaru nodded ruefully. "That was how I justified it to myself. And yet… forgive me, my loves, but I had selfish reasons as well."

The other two said nothing, so Chikaru went on, having come too far to not tell them the rest. "The closest I've ever come to… *wanting* you, the way you want me, the way you want each other… have been those moments when I send a part of myself into you, or feel part of you inside me. I wonder now if the idea of having part of your *Souma* source with me always was solely for the sake of preserving your lives… or if part of it was in some desperate hope that such constant contact might finally wake something up within me."

"Don't punish yourself for that," said Hazuki, gently grasping her shoulder.

"Chikaru, whatever you feel for us, *it's enough*," Tamao insisted.

"Thank you, my darlings," Chikaru said brokenly, "but… I've seen things today that you haven't. I've seen some of the damage that came from my selfishness, and my overconfidence. I… need to take a deep look at myself before I can even consider continuing as we were, *especially* with these… *experiments* of ours."

She took one more steadying breath and finally said it. "I need you both to go. Please. At least until the show's over. Please allow me that. We can talk more after the show. Maybe by then I'll have sorted myself out." *And maybe by then you'll realize you'd be okay without me* .

"You don't have to do this alone," Hazuki whispered.

"On the contrary, Hazuki-chan… to be alone is *exactly* what I need right now."

"Chikaru, please," said Tamao, and Chikaru could tell that she was crying, even though she did not dare to look up and see it for herself.

"It's only for a little while, Tamao-chan," Chikaru assured her. "My… my heart isn't going anywhere, I promise."

"You'll… tell us if you need us before then?" Hazuki asked in a tight voice.

"I will. You'll still see me every day, my loves. Just… leave me my nights for now. Please."

After a long, painful silence, Hazuki was the first to stand. She offered a hand to Tamao, and helped her to her feet. Before they left the room, though, Tamao turned back to Chikaru. "I'll keep saying

this until you believe it, Chikaru: whatever it is you feel for us, it's enough."

"Thank you," Chikaru smiled wearily, wishing with all her heart that she could believe it.

Next: Fragments

AUTHOR'S NOTE: As always, for meta, commentary and throwing heavy objects at the author, please come visit us at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook.

Fragments

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Fair warning - this one gets a little dark, folks.

All around us things come apart

Broken pieces, broken hearts

Fix me, oil me, match me with the next best thing

Person to person or nation to nation

Heels dug in, no communication

Wily time sneaks her weathering

We've been wanting to be held by binding ties

We've been fighting for the love of our lives

-Indigo Girls

Part 21: Fragments

Awkward.

That was really the best word that Remon could conjure for the mood that had taken over the dorm room she and Kizuna shared the night after their unexpected tryst. Whole metric tons of awkward, with a healthy dose of uneasy to top things off. It wasn't so much an elephant in the room at this point as it was a prehistoric woolly mammoth, sucking all the usual warmth out of their evening.

They had gone through their nightly rituals normally, if quietly: brushing teeth, taking turns in the loo, getting into pajamas and settling in for some reading. Rather than sharing a bed for the latter, though, they were each quite decidedly sticking to their own sides of the room. Remon noticed a few times in which Kizuna looked like she wanted to break the silence, but each time her ginger-haired roommate stopped herself and returned to her book. Rather than press the issue (mindful of the thought that she might have pressed too much already), Remon went on studying halfheartedly as the long minutes ticked by.

Eventually, Kizuna put her book away and reached for her bedside lamp, so apparently tonight was not going to be the night that they talked about it.

Or so Remon thought, as Kizuna paused before switching off her light, then sat up in bed, took a long breath, and at last spoke. "Remon-chan?"

"Hmm?" Remon answered.

"I'm worried about Kagome-chan."

"Me too," said Remon quietly, feeling a churning of guilt that somehow *this* was an easier topic for them right now. "I think she's going to be okay, though. She's in good hands."

"Are the rumors true?" Kizuna asked. "You know… about her father?"

"I… don't really want to talk about that, Kizuna-chan," Remon sighed. "I'm sorry."

"But… you were there, right? You were there when they came and took her to the church."

"Yes, I was," Remon said tightly. "But that's exactly why I don't want to talk about it. As much as I love you, Kizuna-chan, it's totally not

my place to talk about it, even to you. If Kagome-chan wants us to know about it, she'll tell us later."

Kizuna made a sour face, but even from the corner of her eye Remon could tell that it was worry rather than annoyance. "I guess so. I hope she lets us take care of her."

"We'll *all* take care of her," said Remon in as reassuring a voice as she could manage.

There was a lengthy pause, and Remon wondered if this would be the end of the conversation, letting her eyes track up and down along the same line of text as she waited.

"Remon-chan?"

"Hmm?"

"So, you… love me?"

"'Course I do."

"Um, thank you. I… I love you too, Remon-chan."

"Good to know."

Another pause, and then Kizuna surprised Remon by dipping her toes into the gulf between them. "Remon-chan, what are we now?"

"Well… that depends. What do you want us to be?"

"Um, please don't be mad, but… I talked to Chikaru-onee-sama about what happened last night."

"I'm shocked," Remon said, deadpan. "Shocked, I tell you."

"Are you mad?"

Remon shook her head, but did not look away from her book. "Nah. I figured you might. How did that go?"

"Well… she said some things that really surprised me," Kizuna said carefully. "But… she also reminded me of some things."

"Like what?"

"Like… how young we are. We're still kids, when you think about it. We're still figuring ourselves out. I mean, geez…" Kizuna gave a nervous chuckle. "We might not even be gay!"

"No, you're absolutely right," Remon nodded, mostly to herself. " *We* might not be gay at all."

"Yeah, I mean, we…" Kizuna began, but then she stopped abruptly. "Oh."

Silence stretched between them, until Kizuna cleared her throat. "So… you're sure, then?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," Remon said, keeping her tone conversational.

"Oh."

Awkward.

After a while, Kizuna made a business of taking a deep breath, then got up and crossed the room to stand at Remon's bedside. "Remon-chan, take your pants off."

"Wait, what?" Remon managed, finally looking up at her roommate. Kizuna's face was a bizarre mix of fear and determination, not to mention flushed a deep red.

"Take your pants off, Remon-chan. We're gonna settle the score right now."

Remon blinked at Kizuna a few times, then smiled, set her book aside, and scooted over slightly. Apparently taking this as a sign to continue, Kizuna sat down on the mattress and settled herself so that they were facing one another. Her breathing had quickened noticeably, and Remon could practically hear her pulse thudding away.

Still smiling, Remon eased herself closer to her longtime friend, until their lips were mere centimeters apart…

… and then reached around behind her and smacked her in the back of the head.

"Ow!" Kizuna yelped, lurching back and raising her hand to her head to rub the spot where Remon had struck her. "Remon-chan?! Did you just… dope-slap me?"

"Yep!" Remon grinned merrily.

"What did you do *that* for?"

"Be *cause* . You're *being* . A *dope* ."

"Huh?!"

Remon couldn't help but laugh. "Come on, Kizuna-chan! D'you think *this* is how I want you? Reluctantly? Forcing yourself to hold serve, or something?"

"But… you *do* want me, don't you?" Kizuna asked, looking almost horrified.

"Sure I do," said Remon. "Doesn't have to be now, though. You think I want to rush you any more than I already did?"

"No, no, Remon-chan, I *wanted* you to last night. At least… I *think* I did, and… I mean, it felt good, but…"

Remon held up one hand to stop her. "Listen, Kizuna-chan, listen. I may not have had my glasses on last night, but I would have had to be *blind* not to see the look on your face there at the end. You didn't want to do it then, and you sure as *hell* don't look like you want to do it now. And that's *okay* . We've got nothing but time."

"But what if I'm not gay?" Kizuna blurted out, her eyes quickly filling with tears.

"Then… you'll probably get married one day," said Remon, "and if for any reason I'm not your Maid of Honor, I call shenanigans. I'll probably babysit your kids, and they'll think of me as that cool eccentric Christmas Cake auntie. You'll call me up and complain about how much it costs to send them to school, and I'll remind you of how much it cost to send *us* to school, so this is payback. We'll have long talks about how modern anime just isn't as good as the stuff we watched during our school days. And you'll be insanely happy, because everyone will know that if they ever hurt you, they'll have *me* to deal with."

Kizuna's tears began falling at about the halfway mark of Remon's speech. "But… then what happens to you?"

"Who knows?" Remon shrugged. "I'll do like gay Japanese women have been doing for generations, and make it up as I go along."

"It wouldn't be fair for me to be happy and for you…"

"No," Remon interrupted her. "It would be totally fair for you to be happy without me, and do you want to know why?"

Kizuna nodded silently.

Here, Remon could feel the threat of her own tears, so she did her best to hold them back with a smile. "Because whatever else happens or doesn't happen between us? Whoever you end up with or don't? I'll always know that I had the honor of being your first. Your first kiss, your first grope, and then last night the first one who got to

hear you make those sounds and got to know that I was causing them." The smile broke into a grin. "I'll remember that forever, Kizuna-chan, and it'll *always* be a good memory."

Kizuna threw her arms around Remon and hugged her tightly, so Remon reciprocated the gesture, her hands rubbing slow circles over the other girl's back.

"Can… can I sleep here tonight, Remon-chan?" Kizuna asked in a tiny voice.

"Of course you can."

Kizuna went to switch off her bedside lamp, then climbed back into Remon's bed and got under the covers with her. "It's still okay to snuggle and stuff?" she asked, immediately grabbing hold of Remon and doing just that.

"Sure, sure."

"And… could I maybe still feel your boobs sometimes?"

Remon did her best to internalize the sigh as much as possible. "Such as they are, sure."

In the end, Chikaru had to be carried to the dressing room, with Shion lifting her from one side and Miyuki the other. There simply wasn't time to let her try to limp the distance on an ankle that was already swelling and turning an angry red. Shizuma and Amane wouldn't be able to ad lib that duel forever.

Once in the dressing room, they got her into a chair as gently as they could manage, at which point Tamao apologetically helped Chikaru out of the top of her Carmen dress, letting out a tiny "meep" as it became apparent that her senpai had not been wearing a bra underneath. At any other time, Shion would have been amused at the way the girl was trying so hard to look at nothing at all, with a

topless Chikaru in front of her and her obvious crush Nagisa being hurried out of her uniform by Miyuki.

Chikaru did her best to plant with her good foot and raise her hips from the seat so that Tamao could slide off the skirt as well, leaving the Lulim president in the ignominious position of sitting there in front of them wearing nothing more than a tiny black thong. They took her decorative hair clips next, stripping her down like a mannequin for the sake of their impromptu understudy.

Luckily, Chikaru's shoes were close enough to Nagisa's size that she would be able to get by with them (there were no dance scenes still to come), and the elastic of the dress enabled it to fit the more petite girl snugly enough. Almost before she was fully dressed, Nagisa was quickly hustled out of the room by Miyuki, with Tamao trailing behind them, stopping only long enough to give a quick bow to the fallen star. "I'm so sorry, Chikaru-sama…"

" *Please, just get her out there," Chikaru said, managing a pained smile. "The show must go on, right?"*

Tamao nodded and hurried after her roommate and her class president, leaving Chikaru and Shion alone. It was at this point that Chikaru's smile dropped, and huge tears began to roll down her cheeks as she folded up on herself, shivering violently.

Shion knew full well that she was probably one of a very small handful of people who had ever seen Chikaru cry, and for just a moment she felt a tiny fragment of warmth at the thought that Chikaru still trusted her enough to see this. But it only lasted a moment.

" *Are you cold?" she asked. "I can get you your uniform."*

" *Please," Chikaru managed.*

She found the other girl's uniform hanging up (it was the one with her normal hair-bows clipped to the collar), and brought it to her, helping

her into skirt, shirt, sweater and a sock for her good foot. All along, Chikaru shook her head and spoke in a small, trembling voice. "I don't understand it, I checked and re-checked the costumes. I made sure the shoes were safe for dancing. How could I miss that? How could I overlook it?"

" *Everyone makes mistakes," Shion tried to assure her, but the words felt hollow even to her.*

" *I checked everything," Chikaru said again. "I know Amane-san was worried about the dance, so I checked them, I* ***know*** *I did."*

" *Chikaru, shoes* ***break*** *," Shion said, putting her hands on her old friend's shoulders. "This isn't anything you did wrong. This is live theater, remember? Aren't you the one who always told me that you never know what'll happen in a live show?"*

Over the single ceiling-mounted speaker, the sound of the unscripted duel came to an end as a new voice rang out across the stage, heralding the arrival of the new Carmen. Chikaru stopped to listen for a moment, and then collapsed further into incoherent sobs as someone else stepped into the role she had wanted so badly. "This was… this was my chance, Shion," she wailed. "I wanted this all my life, and now it's… and now it's…"

Shion knelt next to the chair and hugged Chikaru tightly. She said nothing more, knowing that no words could possibly help at this moment, and instead just let her friend cry.

Kaname's eyes popped open, and she took a deep, shaky breath. Momomi stirred against her, but did not wake.

Gradually, the scene faded from her mind as she stared up into the darkness of her familiar ceiling.

"Well… f*ck," she whispered.

The interview took place in one of the small offices attached to the cathedral, with two policemen seated to one side and Kagome and Chikaru to the other, while Sister Mizue loomed nearby. Chikaru recognized one of them as the inspector who had come to the hill to investigate Hazuki's sword, but the other was anonymous to her.

The former (Fukuyama, she eventually remembered), started in by telling them of the sensitive nature of this interview, and that while the Sister was present in the role of a guardian, to have Chikaru here was somewhat unusual. They asked her relation to the subject of inquiry ("I am her student council president"), and asked Kagome again if she was certain that she wanted a classmate here as they questioned her. When Kagome made it clear that she would not speak without Chikaru beside her, Fukuyama simply nodded and said that there would be non-disclosure forms to sign, while his partner continued scribbling notes on a tablet. They were asked if any of them objected to the interview being recorded, and none did.

The questioning began, and Chikaru felt Kagome's hand tighten on hers as she began to speak in a tiny, distant voice about what she had endured at home. She said that it had started in the bath, explained away as family skinship even as it became more involved and more intrusive. It was years before Kagome even realized that her growing feelings of revulsion were normal, and that families simply did not do this sort of thing.

Chikaru desperately fought every shiver and every tremor of her own, knowing that she needed to be strong for her junior: she was numbly afraid that she would grip the small hand in hers painfully if she let her own emotions out of their bottle. Enduring this was nothing compared to what Kagome had gone through, however, so she kept herself as steady as she could.

Kagome went on to tell how she had tried to go to her mother, but was asked angrily to never speak of this again, to her or anyone else, lest they both be punished. Her mother had disappeared soon after, much to her father's raging, but he promised Kagome that they were still a family, and that with her having run away, he would make

up for the absence by being closer to his little Kagome-chan than ever…

She then went on to tell them of the punishments, and the beatings: always careful not to leave marks anywhere that would show while wearing a school uniform, always conscious of how long to hold off when the next measuring day was approaching, and always with the promise that worse would come if she were to share their "family secrets" with anyone else. The frequent notes excusing her from physical education were not because of her asthma, but to prevent her from having to change clothes in front of anyone while the bruises were still fresh.

The questions became more specific, and Kagome explained in horrifying detail not only the violence and molestation she had experienced, but the lewd acts she herself had been compelled to perform. By the time she told the inspectors about the way her father would photograph her in one demeaning position or another ("So that he could see me even when I was away at school"), Chikaru was having to forcibly swallow back the bile rising to the back of her throat, and she realized that she, a mortal woman suffused with the healing energy of the life-bearing goddess, wanted nothing more than to end a man's life in the most painful manner possible.

The interview wound down soon after this, with Fukuyama asking Kagome if she might know where her father kept some of these photographs (she did, and gave them the appropriate details), and then asking the Sister about the possibility of a physical examination to help corroborate some of the claims (Chikaru felt her other hand clenching into a fist at the idea of these being called "claims," but she knew that the inspector was merely speaking the language of his job).

Here, the formal interview ended, so Kagome hugged Chikaru tightly, telling her senpai that she was going to stay another day or two with the nuns before coming back to the school proper. Chikaru held the tiny girl against her, grateful to be allowed this trust, and said that all

her friends would be there waiting for her upon her return, and would take care of her and keep her safe and loved.

Next, once Kagome had been escorted away, it was Chikaru's turn to describe the events from the previous morning. She repeated every word and detail to the best of her ability, telling herself that it was for Kagome's sake, and that reliving the scene in her mind was the very least that she could do. Fukuyama asked whether Chikaru had ever noticed a history of Kagome fabricating stories for attention, and it was all Chikaru could do to not snap angrily at the man, telling herself once again that he was only doing his job. Instead she told him, without exaggeration, that she had never met a less duplicitous person than Byakudan Kagome.

Once satisfied that they had heard enough, the inspectors gave Chikaru a series of forms to sign, after which they were escorted from the church. After several long minutes in which she stood very still and tried not to scream, Chikaru made the long walk back to St. Lulim, so that she could at least attend some of the day's classes before diving back into her work preparing the opera. The fury gradually cooled, leaving her numbed to the core, and she realized that she could barely feel her own *Souma* . For a moment, she wondered what good it did to possess this healing essence if she could not use it on someone who needed it so desperately.

Just as quickly, though, she dismissed that thought. She could not magic away the horrible memories, nor did she want to. That would be the easy way. That wasn't what a friend would do.

That would be what a *goddess* might do.

"I had a dream about you last night," Tamao said into the silence.

Hazuki shifted slightly in her bed and looked down at the girl in her arms, whose face was still mostly buried against her chest. "A dream? Or… do you think it was a memory?"

"I want to say it was a memory," said Tamao, "but you'd know better, of course. It was about you and Chou'un."

"Hmm," Hazuki acknowledged, wondering vaguely if she might be in trouble. "Where were we?"

"You were sitting high up on a hillside, drinking wine and eating something… bamboo shoots, I think it was… and you were watching the sun go down and talking to one another."

"Ah, yes…" Hazuki said carefully. "That was during my boon."

"It's strange, though, because I would have assumed that if I were seeing a memory of yours, I'd be seeing it through your eyes, but I wasn't. It's like I was observing from outside, taking in the entire scene."

"Yeah, I've noticed that as well. The last time this happened, Chikaru said something about our dream-state subconscious re-framing the scene based on the known data, crafting it into something that makes better sense to our dream-eyes. Or… something like that, anyway. She made it sound a lot smarter, though."

"Hmm," Tamao nodded against her, but said nothing more specific than that.

After a long pause, Hazuki figured she might as well venture into the deeper waters. "So… what do you think? About what you saw?"

Tamao thought about this for a while. "She's… an amazing woman," she said at length.

"That she is," Hazuki agreed, but felt a dull stab to the heart as she realized that the more accurate term would be "was."

"Beautiful, graceful, wise in a trickster-goddess kind of way… very flirtatious…"

"Tamao-chan, am I in trouble?"

"Did you do anything that would get you into trouble?" Tamao said in what Hazuki hoped was a humored tone.

"Well… no, I don't *think* I did, but…"

Tamao finally giggled, and Hazuki felt herself being left off the hook, or so she thought. "You were faithfulness itself, Hazuki-chan. I mean, if you don't count the hugs, the forehead touches, the held hands, the indirect kiss, the cheek-kisses…"

"She's a very affectionate person," Hazuki sighed. "And… honestly, Tamao-chan, so am I."

"I know, silly, I'm just teasing," said Tamao, shifting in Hazuki's arms to smile up at her. "On the contrary, you scored some major girlfriend points with me, as far as I'm concerned."

"I did?"

"Of course you did. You were with a gorgeous woman in an incredibly revealing kimono, sharing a bottle of wine, sitting in a high place watching the sun drench the endless fields of ancient China with its golden, twilight rays… and what did you do?"

Hazuki pulled a blank, and could only stare back into Tamao's humored violet eyes.

"You asked her for advice on how to be a better lover to the women you were coming home to," Tamao grinned. "I'm impressed, Hazuki-chan. There you were, sitting with a goddess-tier beauty in one of the most romantic settings possible, and you still made it all about us."

Tamao laid her head back down on Hazuki's chest, still smiling. "I think I understand now what she means to you, Hazuki-chan. I feel like I finally got the chance to meet her, and I'm grateful for that. It still feels strange to have intruded on your memories, but… I'm actually kind of glad I got to see that. Your bond with her is part of

what makes you… well, *you* . I can't be upset about that, any more than I could be… well, upset about… about what happened with Eve-sama."

"You're… *not* upset about that?" Hazuki asked quietly, somewhat surprised that Tamao had brought it up.

"Not with *you*, Hazuki-chan, no," Tamao clarified. "The way you reacted to her was proof enough of your feelings."

Hazuki frowned, finding it still somewhat difficult to focus on that restored memory. "It was a selfish reaction, though. I was afraid that what she was doing meant I was a terrible person."

"And if you were a terrible person you would have taken her lead," Tamao said in a small, somewhat cold voice. "She assumed the worst of you, Hazuki-chan, and you proved her wrong. I'm… proud of you."

"… Thank you, Tamao-chan," Hazuki whispered, tightening her arms around the smaller girl.

There was another long silence, and Hazuki attempted once more to pick through those memories, trying to attach the images with the emotions. Confusion, mostly, bleeding into sheer horror…

"Do you think Eve-sama is still in love with you?" Tamao eventually asked, dropping the difficult question into their laps.

"I don't know," Hazuki admitted, grasping for the words Eve had said at the end of the aborted encounter, in which she absolved Hazuki of blame, and instead pointed to her own regrets. "I… really don't know."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried, Hazuki-chan," said Tamao. "Not about you, of course, but… about what she might do."

"Are you angry with her?" Hazuki asked.

Tamao snuggled into her a little before she spoke again. "I don't feel angry so much as… shaken. Disappointed, even. And… truly, a little bit scared, though I don't know if I'm scared *of* her or *for* her. Are you? Angry, I mean?"

"Furious, when I think about it," Hazuki nodded. "But I also… can't help thinking it's my fault, somehow. I have so much baggage with her, Tamao, and I've always blamed myself for everything that went wrong between us. It's a hard habit to break. This time, though… I don't quite know what to think. It's like… is it okay for me to feel like I was the one who was wronged this time?"

"Well, *I* certainly think it is. You did the right thing."

Hazuki let out a slow sigh. "Well, one thing's for sure."

"What's that?"

"The next visit to the Great Library is gonna be a little awkward."

Tamao couldn't help a giggle at that. "I'm sure Lilith-sama will find a way to keep the mood light."

"Or Ken-chan will say something inappropriate to break the tension."

"Oh, definitely."

The conversation trailed off again, and eventually Tamao lifted her head in an attempt to see the clock. "What time is it, Hazuki-chan?"

"Seven-fifty," Hazuki sighed. "About that time, then."

"So it appears."

Tamao gave the other woman one last warm squeeze before getting up off the bed and smoothing out her uniform. This had become the new routine, seeing as neither of them wished to push her luck with Sister Mizue. They could still have an abbreviated evening together, but it was back to their respective rooms by eight o'clock.

"I love you," Hazuki said softly, getting up from the bed as well and giving Tamao a lingering kiss.

"Mmm, I love you too," Tamao whispered, hugging the taller girl tightly.

"Want me to walk you to your room?"

"No, I'll be fine. We stayed a little late tonight: no sense risking you not getting back in time."

"Okay. See you at breakfast, then."

Tamao smiled as she opened the door, but there was a melancholic tinge to it. "Hazuki-chan," she said then, "I… I've really enjoyed getting to spend the last few evenings with you like this."

"Me too."

"Even so, though…"

Hazuki nodded. "I know, Tamao-chan. Soon, I hope."

There was no need to specify what "soon" meant, of course.

Kagome's return to the normal routine of classes, dormitory mealtimes and club activities was handled as quietly as possible, almost as though no one wished to acknowledge that she had ever been absent in the first place.

There were differences, of course, not the least of which being the buzz of hushed conversation that would break out as soon as she left a room, or the fact that she was never unaccompanied, with one or more friends hovering protectively over her at every turn. The first of those, Kaname found, made her clench her fists at the thought of what they might be discussing behind the girl's back, and she wanted nothing more than to scream at them to shut the hell up.

The second of them, of course, was making it difficult to get the chance to talk to the Lulim second-year. Not that Kaname was intimidated by any of the girl's unofficial escorts, of course, but rather it was…

Well, to be completely honest with herself, Kaname was not sure what it was, but after a few days of this, she decided that enough was enough. She found Kagome having lunch out on the lawn of the dormitory courtyard, in the company of Tsubomi and Chiyo. In and of itself, it made for a cute picture: three diminutive juniors, one from each of the academies, sharing an awkward meal together. In any other circumstance, even Kaname would have found it mildly adorable.

This, however, was not any other circumstance. "Byakudan-kun," she said in a quiet voice as she stepped closer, positioning herself opposite their little confab. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Kagome looked up at her senior, eyes and expression completely blank. The reaction of her companions, however, was more telling: Tsubomi was guardedly hostile, while Chiyo was obviously intimidated, which translated into babbling. "Kenjō-senpai!" she gasped. "Um, hello, Kenjō-senpai! Um, is there something Kenjō-senpai needs, Kenjō-senpai?"

"Hello, Tsukidate-kun," Kaname acknowledged the Miator girl, who looked shocked that Kaname actually knew her name. "I was hoping for a chance to talk to you, Byakudan-kun. Would now be a good time?"

Kagome gave her a slow nod, but neither of the other two made any indication of leaving, so Kaname knelt to bring herself closer to the girl's eye level. "Byakudan-kun… may I call you Kagome?"

Another nod, which Kaname took as a good sign. "Okay then… Kagome-chan…"

"No," said Kagome suddenly, even as the other two girls visibly flinched.

Kaname blinked a few times. "My apologies, then. Should I stick with Byakudan-kun?"

"You can call me Kagome," the Lulim girl said quietly. "But not… that other. I don't want to be called that anymore."

"I understand," Kaname nodded, even though she didn't. She could hazard a guess, though, and she did not like it at all. "Kagome, then. You know, I never thanked you for what you did for me a few weeks ago."

Kagome turned her head slightly to one side, but as was her custom, said nothing.

"The time I came to the naginata team to have a spar with Hazuki, and there was that accident," Kaname elaborated. "There were a lot of people who were upset with me… not that I can blame them… but when Nanto-san was laying into me over in the waiting room, you stuck up for me. I never thanked you for that then, so I wanted to do it now. It was nice to think that someone understood."

"You didn't hurt Hazuki-senpai on purpose," said Kagome in a grave voice.

"And I appreciate it that you knew that," Kaname nodded. "So, again… thank you, Kagome."

"You're welcome," Kagome replied, bowing her head slightly.

Kaname paused, wondering if she should say the rest, but in the end she could not stop herself. "Kagome… there are some ugly rumors going around right now, about things that may have happened to you. I don't know if they're true or not, but if they are… then I want you to know that you and I have something in common."

She gave a shocked Tsubomi and Chiyo each a glare in turn, as though daring them to add that particular grist to the rumor mill, then looked once more into Kagome's eyes. "So that in mind, I wanted to make you a promise, Kagome. If you ever need help, if he ever tries anything like that again, I want you to come and find me, and I'll protect you, just like you protected me. That's a promise."

To Kaname's shock, she suddenly found herself with her arms full of Kagome, who sprang up to hug her senpai tightly. Kaname returned the embrace, for the first time truly realizing how *tiny* Kagome was. Her mind roiled between gratitude for this trust, fury at the idea that anyone could have hurt this delicate little girl, and a dark loathing that reminded her that Kagome was only a year younger than Hikari had been when Kaname had…

They broke, and Kaname nodded to the other two girls. "Tsukidate-kun, Okuwaka-kun, I'm sorry to have interrupted your lunch. Thank you for taking care of her." That said, she stood up, and gave Kagome's hands one last squeeze before excusing herself.

She had made it about forty meters before Tsubomi caught up with her. "Kenjō-senpai, wait!"

Kaname took a steadying breath, then turned back to her pink-haired kohai. "Yes, Okuwaka-kun?"

Tsubomi gave a small, squirming frown, which normally meant that she was about to say something hugely inappropriate, even knowing full well that she shouldn't. "Is that true?" she blurted out. "About… about you? Someone… hurt you like that?"

"Someone did," Kaname nodded, crossing her arms and giving the smaller girl a challenging glare.

It was Tsubomi who finally broke eye contact. "I… I don't get it," she said in a low voice. "If you know what it's like, then… why did you do those things to Étoile-sama last year?"

Kaname actually let out a single wry laugh at that, then gave Tsubomi a pat on the head. "You're a good girl, Okuwaka-kun. You really are."

"Don't patronize me!" Tsubomi snapped, then made a visible struggle to rein herself in. "I mean… senpai…"

"No, I mean it," said Kaname. "You managed to nail the difficult question right from the start. I don't have an answer for you, except that… we each deal with things in our own way… and some of those ways end up being even more f*cked-up than what caused them in the first place. All we can do then is try to make amends. Speaking of which…"

To Tsubomi's visible shock, Kaname turned and bowed to her. "Okuwaka-kun, I apologize for threatening you after you saw me coming out of Hazuki's room that night. I have no excuse."

"Um… well… that's…" Tsubomi stammered, then took a breath to collect herself. "Well… if you hadn't done that, I might not have asked Hazuki-senpai for self-defense lessons, and then we wouldn't have started that new club, so… in a weird way, it kinda worked out."

"Hmm, I'm flattered," Kaname smirked. "But hey, if my being a f*ck-up can keep someone else from getting hurt, then so be it."

"You really *have* changed, haven't you?" Tsubomi said, her eyes wide with disbelief in spite of her words. "I mean, Étoile-sama always says you have, but…"

Kaname crossed her arms and regarded the younger girl. "Well, Okuwaka-kun, someone once said that the alternative to change is death. Maybe I just got tired of being dead?"

She nodded to the girl, then turned and continued on her way. This time, Tsubomi did not follow.

Next: Sitsprobe

AUTHOR'S OTHER NOTE: Today marks eight years since I posted the first chapter of Strange Fire.

Eight. Years.

It, um, wasn't supposed to take this long, and for that, I apologize. We're in the winding-down phase now, though, with a handful of chapters left, culminating in the performance of *Pirates of Penzance*, and the events that follow. After that, we'll see about a Book III. I have lots of ideas, but the fact is that Yamibou is a fifteen-year-old show now, and Strawberry Panic is not far behind. I'm honestly not sure how much of an audience is left at this stage.

Those of you who are reading this, thank you for sticking with me thus far. Cheers!

Sitzprobe

And when it breaks down, I beg you don't go

I circle your ship, I'm ready to blow

I try to outflank you with an army of words

I strategize - I am fighting for the love of my life

-Indigo Girls

Part 22: Sitzprobe

There was an ongoing joke among Sayuri's friends that her current stress level was inversely proportional to the height of her ponytail. Like many such localized campus legends, there was a kernel of truth to it: the less stressed Sayuri was feeling, the more time she tended to spend on her appearance, including her hair. On busier days, she tended to opt for a quick tie-back.

It thus came as no surprise to Chikaru that when Sayuri showed up to the latest directorial meeting, she was about five centimeters south of her normal high-crested topknot, with her face seemingly incapable of even the ghost of a smile. Ayame, by comparison, seemed to be holding it together far better than her longtime roommate, but was still a far cry from her normal sunny self.

Not that there had been a lot to smile about for the past week, of course.

Normally, during any student council meeting for St. Lulim, the three of them would share a single silent cup of tea before getting down to business, and for the most part the directorial staff meetings for *Pirates* had followed this same model. Today, though, they were

each on their third cup before Chikaru realized that she was going to have to take the lead and get things moving. Normally this came so naturally to her, but now..?

"You two look like you have some stories to tell me," she ventured.

"How are the costumes coming along?" Ayame asked.

Chikaru blinked at the short-haired girl, curious to know why she was turning it back around like this. "Quite well, actually. Everyone should have enough to rehearse in within the next couple of days, and I can continue doing detail work on my overnights. Why do you ask?"

Ayame nodded. "I… just think it would be good for everyone if you could start coming to the rehearsals as soon as you can, rather than toward the end, like we originally planned. I know it would do *me* a lot of good to have another set of eyes watching, and offering suggestions. It's like… I know what I want some of the staging to look like, but I'm not sure if they're actually hitting the marks, or if I'm seeing them as doing so because I know what I'm expecting to see. Does that make sense?"

"Sort of like proof-reading your own essays?" Chikaru offered. "You know what you *wanted to* say, so you read that instead of what you *did* say?"

"Exactly that."

"Well, if you can handle having me find a spot in the audience and watching while I hand-sew, I suppose that would work."

Ayame bowed her head slightly. "I'd certainly appreciate it."

"Very well. How about the musical end of things, Sayuri? You look troubled."

"We need microphones," Sayuri said without preamble.

"You're sure, then?" Chikaru sighed.

"Almost completely certain. Last night we had our first rehearsal in the concert hall itself, and I asked Ayame to check sound levels from a few spots in the audience as I went through some of the numbers with them."

"I take it it didn't go well?"

Ayame shook her head slightly. "Sayuri-chan, it wasn't *that* bad…"

"And we can thank the architects for that," Sayuri nodded. "That place has great acoustics. But could you make out any words? Could you hear the soloists over the chorus?"

"Well, *most* of the time," Ayame nodded. "But then again, I also know what they're supposed to be saying, like we were just talking about."

Sayuri slowly massaged her forehead with one hand. "I think it's only going to get worse once we have an orchestra there in the pit. Speaking of which, I just found out that Amane-sama and Hikari-sama won't be at the sitzprobe due to Étoile commitments."

"What?" said Chikaru. "I thought they were cleared of…"

"I thought they were, too," Sayuri frowned, then made an apologetic grimace as she realized she had just interrupted. "The Sister wouldn't tell me what it was about, though, so… we're stuck with the hand we're dealt. Again."

Chikaru nodded slowly. This was certainly bad news: the sitzprobe was the first chance the cast would have to work with the orchestra before they went into the final tech and dress rehearsals. To be missing their lead soprano would be bad enough, but for Amane to lose rehearsal time was not going to make things easier for any of them, particularly the beleaguered Étoile.

"Thank you for your candor, Sayuri," Chikaru said at length, "and I thank both of you for your hard work. I know the hall has the capability for floor and boom microphones, and I'll consult with the

Dramatic Arts sensei to see if we can borrow body-mikes, in case we need them. Meanwhile, though, let's hold any decisions until the sitzprobe, when we hear how they sound with the orchestra.

"Understood," Sayuri nodded, though she did not look any less concerned.

"You're off your game, Azuma-san."

Hazuki did not pause at these words, but instead continued to warily circle her teacher, *shinai* held at the ready. "Are you sure you're not just saying that to try to *pull me* off my game, sensei?"

"No, you don't really seem like you need my help with that," Kojima-sensei said conversationally, before aiming a high thrust which Hazuki parried to one side. "You were late on that one."

"Got the job done, didn't I?" Hazuki replied, determined not to rise to the bait.

"True, but not with your customary indifference. You look like I'm actually making you work for a change, and as much as I'd like to pat myself on the back for that, I'm too old and bitter to think that this has anything to do with *me* ."

"You…" Hazuki began, but quickly broke off. She knew, intellectually, that Kojima-sensei's own formidable skills had been improving now that she had the opportunity to spar regularly with someone closer to her own level, but she also knew that it was not her place to say such a thing to her sensei.

"Maybe you found another setting on that dial after all?" the sensei went on, feinting a couple of attacks before taking a swing at the wrists, again dodged. "No, excuse me, it was a switch wasn't it? You never told me, Azuma-san, what *are* those two settings of yours?"

"Teach… and kill," Hazuki said in a low voice.

Kojima-sensei stifled a chuckle. "I see. You know, I've said something like this before, but coming from anyone else that would have sounded like puffed-up emo warrior bullsh*t. From you I can actually believe it, *shugenja* . Except right now, of course."

"What exactly do you want to see from me, sensei?"

"For starters, maybe you could make up with your girlfriends already."

For just an instant, Hazuki's mind blanked, but that was all it took for Kojima-sensei to come in with another blow to the wrists that sent Hazuki's own weapon spinning away to land out of reach on the padded floor. A wave of cold fury swept through her as she looked up the length of her teacher's blade.

"You. Are off. Your game."

Hazuki said nothing in reply: just stared frigidly at her teacher, biting her lip to keep herself from speaking.

"You can say it," Kojima-sensei nodded.

"That was cheap, sensei," Hazuki growled.

"Yes, it certainly was," the sensei agreed, lowering her blade. "But I also hope I've made my point. You may be some kind of Zen-mystic goddess-in-training, but you're also a sixteen-year-old girl letting her relationship troubles take her off her game, and I'm not just talking about your sparring."

Hazuki nearly said something about how her journey had left her older than her chronological age, but now was not the time to get into that with someone who still did not know her full story. "I'm not having 'relationship troubles,'" she said instead.

"Humor me, Azuma-san," the sensei sighed, taking off her helmet and indicating that her student should do the same. From there they

left the center of the otherwise-empty sparring room and sat down at one of the walls, where they had left their gear and water. "I know it's been centuries since I was a teenager, but give me a *little* credit for having been there. Do you really think that no one noticed when Minamoto-san didn't show up to the last naginata practice?"

"She's busy with the opera."

"Of course she is. She's always been one of the busiest people on campus, opera or no opera. And yet she always made time for your practices. Now, quite suddenly and quite visibly, that's changed. Never mind the way you, she, and Suzumi-san have been wandering the grounds with your own private rainclouds over your heads, and it seems like all the students in the academies - not to mention some of the teachers - are on tenterhooks waiting for something to happen."

"You're exaggerating," Hazuki said, shifting uncomfortably.

"This is your first year here, Azuma-san. You've yet to learn just how much this place feeds on romantic drama. Now, I'm just your kendō instructor, and I've got boundaries to keep… but I'm also a bitter, aging lesbian who doesn't want to see someone else repeat some of her more spectacular mistakes."

Hazuki turned to stare at her teacher again, but this time her eyes were wide with shock. "Sensei?"

"Good grief, Azuma-san, don't tell me you hadn't figured *that* out yet…" Kojima-sensei sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Um… no, I… kind of thought you might be, but…" She broke off, then took a breath before continuing. "I guess I'm just surprised that you're telling me, that's all. I mean…"

"Yes, yes, I'm doing a crappy job keeping those boundaries I was just talking about, I know." The sensei paused a moment and looked out across the room, but her eyes were seemingly focused on

something far more distant. "Watching you right now is just… bringing back a few things I've never quite managed to keep buried, and… I don't want to see *anyone* go through that, prize pupil or not."

There was a long pause, during which Hazuki tried to find something to say that would be even remotely appropriate. Her instructor had let her guard down, but this was no longer a spar, and in spite of the many questions rushing through her head, Hazuki thought it best not to press. "You're right, sensei," she settled on at last. "Things are… awkward right now, but… I really do think that it will all work out."

"And..?" Kojima-sensei prompted her.

"And I'll do my best to make sure it does."

"Good girl," the older woman nodded, giving that rare, tiny hint of a smile that Hazuki had only seen a handful of times. "See that you do. Less drama makes things easier on your poor, beleaguered teachers."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Another silence followed, during which Kojima-sensei's almost-smile faded into a look bordering on consternation. "Now, all of this being said, as long as I'm trampling all over the sacred boundaries that exist between teacher and student, there was something I wanted to ask you which might be construed as highly inappropriate, so you can stop me at any time. Or even now, if you'd rather."

Hazuki blinked. "Um… okay? Go ahead?"

Kojima-sensei clenched her jaw, obviously biting back on her words before finally letting them fly. "Your friend, Fengxian-san."

Again, Hazuki blinked. "Ren? What about her?"

"So… is she into women or not?"

"Thank you for having me here, Ren-san," Chikaru said quietly as Ryofu poured tea for the two of them.

"You said you wanted to speak to me," said Ryofu, kneeling opposite her and taking her teacup in both hands.

Chikaru nodded, but delayed by looking around the main room of Ryofu's cottage. It still did not appear particularly lived-in, and Chikaru had to wonder how much time Ryofu actually spent here other than to sleep and eat. The image of her lounging on a couch watching television or reading a good book seemed completely foreign to the Ryofu that she had come to know.

The silence lingered, and Chikaru remembered that it was her turn to speak. "We haven't had many chances to talk, just the two of us, have we?"

"Mm," Ryofu agreed.

"And we certainly haven't had much of an opportunity to speak since that night. I'm so sorry for the trouble I caused you."

"There were members of the board who wanted me dismissed from the school," Ryofu said bluntly, "but the Étoile told them I was good with the horses, so they just shouted at me and took some of my pay. I don't think I get to make any more mistakes."

Chikaru winced, but at the same time found herself grateful for Amane's intervention. "Is it a problem that I'm here, then? I don't want to get you into any more trouble."

"I asked if I can have visitors before curfew, and that's still allowed."

"That's good," Chikaru nodded. "But… I also wanted to apologize more specifically for… the accident that night. You looked like it really affected you, and I was worried. Hazuki-chan told me you were okay, but…"

Ryofu got a distant look in her eyes. "After Chinkyuu died," she said slowly, "when I returned to my world after fighting the dead things with you, I… stopped feeling the passage of time in the usual way. I spent most of my time taking care of my trees, along with any animals who came to live near me. Sometimes I barely noticed the changing seasons. Trees grow up slowly, and I think my life slowed down with them."

Here, Ryofu paused, but Chikaru did not dare speak, and risk interrupting her story.

After taking a slow sip of her tea, Ryofu went on. "When our spirits got mixed up, for just a moment I felt like I could see all of your lives, like I was looking through your eyes, and… your lives were all so *short* compared to mine. Hazuki says that I'm more than a thousand years old now, but that was the first time I really felt the length of those years, as they compared with yours. The weight of all those days was… crushing me."

"I'm so sorry, Ren-san," Chikaru whispered.

"No," Ryofu said, shaking her head. "It's better that I know how long it's been. It helps me remember Chinkyuu better."

There was almost a faint smile as Ryofu said this, and Chikaru asked the next question without really thinking it through. "Ren-san… what was Chinkyuu to you?"

"My companion," said Ryofu. "She… loved me."

"Did… you love her?"

Ryofu closed her eyes. "Differently," she said at last. "But she stayed with me anyway."

They were veering into extremely personal territory now, but there was more that Chikaru wanted to know. "Ren-san, would it be all right with you if I asked your opinion on some rather personal

matters? I have the feeling that you have a perspective that I do not, and your thoughts would be of great value to me."

"Our spirits have touched," said Ryofu. "I have nothing to hide from you. Ask."

Chikaru nodded, then pondered where to start. "Ren-san… do you experience sexual desire?"

"I sought out intercourse once," Ryofu said, furrowing her brow in thought. "I thought perhaps Chinkyuu wanted to raise a child with me, so I gave my services in battle to Ryuubi Gentoku in exchange for a night with her husband, and asked him to impregnate me." Her expression darkened. "He had a very large penis. It was an unpleasant experience, and I did not conceive."

"I… see," said Chikaru, quickly realizing that Ryofu's personal boundaries were going to be a moving target. "But other than that… *occasion*, have you ever felt drawn to the idea of having sex with someone?"

"Not after Chinkyuu told me she didn't want a child after all."

"But… even for pleasure, and not procreation?"

The look Ryofu gave her made Chikaru realize that the idea of sex for pleasure had never even occurred to Ryofu, and further, she realized that she and Ryofu might have far more in common than she had known, even if they were approaching from different directions.

"Well, may I ask another question, then?"

"Yes."

Chikaru chewed on her lower lip for a moment before she spoke. "What do you think about two women having sex?"

"That wouldn't be natural," said Ryofu.

The flat denial shocked Chikaru. Surely Ryofu couldn't be homophobic?

"Unless one of them has a penis," Ryofu then continued. "I once knew a woman who had a penis, but she was not interested in having intercourse with other women."

"She…" Chikaru managed, trying to reconcile the homophobic statement with Ryofu's apparent blasé acceptance of a transsexual woman. "Wait, wait," she said, trying to rein things in. "When you say it wouldn't be natural, do you specifically mean that two women can't produce children together?"

Ryofu nodded.

"Well… discounting the child-bearing part, then, what do you think about two women being… intimate?"

Ryofu cocked her head to one side, looking distantly puzzled.

"You know," Chikaru said, even though perhaps she didn't, "two women kissing, or touching each other intimately, or being in love with each other and wanting to give each other physical pleasure."

The light dawned, and Ryofu nodded quickly. "Oh! You don't mean intercourse. You mean affection."

"Um, well, yes? But that doesn't seem like the proper..?"

"I think women should be affectionate if they want to be," Ryofu went on nodding. "Many women in my time preferred to be affectionate with other women instead of men. Sousou was famous for taking only women to her bed. Kan'u and Chou'un were…"

"But… you call it affection?" Chikaru interrupted. "In this time, that word is more along the lines of hugging, or holding hands, or even the way you rub your face against Hazuki-chan's. Not the kind of touching that… that…"

"Makes your body prepare for intercourse?" Ryofu supplied.

"Yes, that. Or the kind of touching that gives you… a climax."

Ryofu cocked her head again, this time to the other side. "You call that sex in this time? So sex doesn't mean intercourse?"

"Well, no, it means that too, but… I guess that sex means more to us than *just* intercourse now, especially when it's two women, or I suppose two men."

"Hmm," said Ryofu, visibly pondering this.

Chikaru took a deep breath and tried to steer things back toward her original point. "So… now that we have our terminology straight… have you ever felt the desire for what *we* call sex, and what *you* call affection?"

Ryofu thought about this for far longer than Chikaru would have expected, and eventually shook her head. "Not for myself."

"You're asexual," Chikaru said quietly. *Just like me* .

"Hmm," Ryofu said again.

Something from earlier in the conversation clicked. "So when you said that you loved Chinkyuu differently, was that what you meant?"

"Chinkyuu was interested in affection with me," Ryofu nodded slowly. "Once she was mature enough, anyway."

"Was… was that ever a problem for the two of you? That she desired it and you didn't?"

"Hmm," Ryofu pondered. "Sometimes. I think she was frustrated because she couldn't make my body do the things that hers did."

Once again, Chikaru felt like she was potentially stepping on a personal boundary landmine. "Wait… did you have… I mean, were

you affectionate with *her?* "

"When she asked me to be."

"Even when you didn't feel the same desire?"

"It made her happy," Ryofu said simply. "Once I learned how, that is. She sometimes felt guilty about asking because I didn't need for her to return it, so she asked less and less as we got older."

"Is… that so?"

Ryofu's expression darkened again, taking on a hint of sadness. "Since I didn't want it, I thought that maybe she didn't want it any more either, so I didn't think about it much, but after she died I wondered if maybe she had just been hiding it so she didn't feel like she was using me."

"I'm… sorry, Ren-san. I didn't mean to make you think of sad memories."

"I'm okay," Ryofu whispered, her words at odds with her expression. "I loved Chinkyuu very much. I just wish now that I had told her that it was always okay to ask."

Chikaru reached across the table and laid her hand over Ryofu's. The ancient general flinched for a moment at the contact of their *Souma*, but then she let it flow reassuringly between them once again.

Given recent events, it took some time for Kaname and Hazuki to get back to their regular workouts, and once they did so there were a few extra unspoken rules in place. First, there was a concerted effort on both sides to dial back the intensity and work mostly on technique. Second, they added extra padding to their practice weapons. Third, they worked in private rather than in front of a

potential audience: a detail which made Kaname wonder yet again how Hazuki could trust her that much.

Fourth, neither of them was to speak of The Kiss. Ever.

Okay, maybe the fourth one was more Kaname than Hazuki, as the younger girl had given every indication that she had either forgotten about it, or had other things on her mind. That, of course, did not ease the dull guilt Kaname was feeling for having once again extended her streak of taking advantage of people, but she would be damned if she brought it up first.

Or maybe Hazuki was just sitting on it, waiting for the opportunity to trot it back out for maximum guilt potential? Surely she hadn't just forgotten? After their initial months of hostility, after a f*ck-you kiss, after *a goddamn broken neck*, it wasn't like Hazuki was lacking in ammunition…

Once they were back to their lockers after today's spar, Kaname undressed slowly, trying not to think too much about it. First the laborious process of getting out of her gear, then shrugging out of her shirt and stripping off her sport bra, then sitting at the bench to work on getting her shoes off.

It was at this point that she glanced sideways and saw something wholly unexpected: Hazuki was already completely undressed, and was reaching into her locker for a clean towel. What was unusual about it, though, was that Hazuki was not making her normal effort to face away from Kaname as she did so. While it was not *exactly* full-frontal, it was maybe… three quarters? Was she *that* distracted? Or was she really being *that* trusting?

"What?" Hazuki said suddenly.

Kaname realized that she had been staring, so she said the first thing that came to mind. "So, hey… you said you've got nice abs. Where are they, then?"

"Where are my… what?" Hazuki frowned.

"You know, your abs. You work out like a beast: you should be shredded."

Hazuki glanced down at herself, then turned her frown back on Kaname. "You sure you were looking for my abs?"

"Sure," Kaname smirked. "They should be right there under those delectable t*ts you've got."

Hazuki flushed more quickly and deeply than Kaname thought possible, then turned away, bringing the towel up to cover herself. "Delectable?" she growled, but there was a distinct tremor in it. " *That's* what you're going to go with? *Delectable?* "

For a moment, Kaname almost continued the teasing, but then she felt her heart sink as she realized that she might have once again damaged the trust that she wasn't sure she deserved in the first place.

Instead, she took a deep breath, then continued undressing. "Okay, listen up, 'cause I want to be really clear with you about this. You've got a *great* body, okay? That being said, I have *no* desire to have sex with you, seriously. I'm *not* trying to hit on you."

"Well, I guess *that's* a relief," Hazuki said in a sour tone.

"You know, this is when you're supposed to get all offended and wonder why I'm not interested in you."

"I'll skip that part, thanks."

Kaname realized that this was not something she was going to be able to fix with humor alone. "Look… I'm sorry, okay? I was just bantering, I promise. Plus, I really *was* wondering about your abs."

After a pause, Hazuki wrapped her towel around her waist, covered her breasts with one arm, then turned back to Kaname and flexed

the muscles in her abdomen.

"Oh, *there* they are!"

"Satisfied?"

"That'll do, sure. But seriously, with the way you work out, I'm surprised you've got anything *but* muscle down there."

"Self-perception," Hazuki said as she turned and headed for the showers. "Maybe I don't *want* to look like you could do laundry on my torso."

Kaname grabbed a towel of her own and followed the other girl. "I guess I always considered the muscle definition to be a reward for all the hard work."

"Hmm," Hazuki grunted, hanging up her towel outside her chosen shower stall, then turning on the water and stepping into the spray. Kaname took the next stall over, and a few long moments passed while she let the hot water sink in.

She then glanced across the partition between them to see that Hazuki's expression remained stormy. "Still pissed at me?"

"Delectable?" Hazuki scowled again. "Who the hell says delectable?"

"Would you have preferred something else?"

"I would have *preferred* my sparring partner to not say *anything* about my breasts, thanks."

The term "sparring partner" stung a little bit, but Kaname figured she probably deserved it. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I'm not even that much of a boob girl. Not as much as Momomi thinks I am, anyway."

"Oh, really?"

"Mm hmm," Kaname replied as she stuck her head under the spray. "Don't get me wrong, she's got a really nice pair."

"Yeah, they're not bad," Hazuki agreed.

Kaname was about to say something about how nobody liked them more than Momomi herself, but then it hit her what Hazuki had just said. "Wait, what?"

"I… said they're not bad," Hazuki repeated, looking a bit defensive.

"When did..?" Kaname said, blinking the water from her eyes. "What, did you get a look after naginata practice or something?"

"Wait… you didn't know?" Hazuki asked, turning surprised eyes toward Kaname. "It was back when I was first at this school, right here in this locker room. She came in and tried to put the moves on me. I… guess I assumed that you put her up to it."

"No, no, I knew about how she was going to do her little bee act on you, just to try to see how serious you and Chikaru were, but… I didn't know she brought the girls out!"

Hazuki's expression was a weird mix of embarrassed and a little amused. "Well, I wasn't exactly cooperating with her, so she stepped up to me while I was sitting on the bench, opened her coat, and *bwonng*, suddenly my whole field of vision was boobs."

"Damn," said Kaname, more than a little surprised that Momomi had gone that far. She then thought back to how angry her girlfriend had looked upon her return to the Spica Student Council office. "Obviously you didn't bite? I mean, metaphorically?"

"Not literally either," Hazuki snorted. "Actually, being the terrible lesbian that I am, I realized that this was the first time I'd ever been *that close* to another girl's bare breasts, and for some reason, having it happen *that way* just struck me as really funny, so I… kind of started laughing. Um, kind of hysterically, really."

"Laughed at the Kiyashiki Twins? Damn, I feel bad for her now."

"Well, I think she got over it. She's been friendly enough with me lately. Are you mad?"

"Mad? At her being friendly with you?"

"No, are you mad I saw your girlfriend's boobs?"

Kaname actually had to think about this for a moment, because no, she did not feel even a hint of anger. Discomfort, maybe, as she thought about the possible reasons why Momomi had tried to take it as far as she had, but she wasn't really in a position to find any fault with anything Momomi might have done during that rocky period of their relationship.

Instead of answering the question, then, Kaname took things in a different direction. "We took a weird road getting here, didn't we?"

Hazuki looked confused at the turn of the conversation, then her expression became more thoughtful. "Where exactly is here, though?"

"Well, in a purely literal sense, we're standing naked within two meters of one another, albeit with a shower wall in the way. But… how is it that we got to the point that we can do this, in spite of… everything?" She wanted to say "everything I did," but those words would not come.

"I'm not sure I can answer that," said Hazuki. "Though,… as long as we're asking uncomfortable questions about *everything*, why exactly did you kiss me?"

"Because I was pissed off," Kaname replied without hesitation. "For me, sex and anger are a little too closely associated for my own good, and… it felt more… *appropriate* than just hitting you."

"You *know* by now that was happened was an accident, I hope." Hazuki was still speaking quietly enough that no one else could possibly hear them over the running water, and Kaname was grateful for that, even though she was more than certain that the two of them were alone.

"Yeah, I get that, but… I wasn't really thinking clearly. I was angry, I was all kinds of turned on, I felt taken advantage of, I felt bad for *feeling* taken advantage of considering how many times I've been on the other side of that myself, but most of all I guess I realized that you guys had something that Momomi and I will *never* be able to have, and I was f*cking *pissed* at that."

"So you had to get the upper hand back," Hazuki nodded. She said it factually, without a hint of accusation in her tone.

"Probably," Kaname said, giving a short sigh. "Don't worry, though. I meant what I said earlier. I don't want that from you."

"Well, good," Hazuki replied, looking away. "Because even though I'm still not quite sure how we got here, I'm… pretty satisfied with what we *do* have."

"Hazuki?"

"Hmm?"

"That was *incredibly* cheesy."

"Don't care."

It was difficult to knock on Chikaru's door, given her burden, but Tamao managed.

A few moments later, the door opened, and Chikaru's eyes widened as she took in the sight of Tamao, arms filled with stacks of folders, books and papers. "Tamao-chan?" she asked.

"Chikaru, may I come in?"

There was a tiny pause, then Chikaru opened the door more widely and allowed Tamao to step into her room. The Miatoran girl made her way inside, then unceremoniously dumped her armful on the side of Chikaru's bed before turning around to face her semi-estranged friend.

For her part, Chikaru looked from Tamao, to the messy pile of paper, then back again. "I could be wrong, Tamao-chan, but I sense you have something to say to me."

"I do," Tamao nodded, closing her eyes against that searching gaze. "And I know that you asked us to give you space until the end of the show, and I'm sorry for intruding on that, but I can't let this fester any longer, I'm sorry."

"All right," Chikaru said, her tone reassuring.

"Hazuki-chan doesn't know that I'm here," Tamao went on. "I think she would have tried to talk me out of it."

"All right," Chikaru repeated. "You have my undivided attention, Tamao-chan."

Tamao took a series of breaths. She had rehearsed part of this, but once she started, the words just came out in a blurt. "One of the only good things about being alone for so long was that it gave me the chance to do a lot of reading, and more than that, it gave me a lot of practice researching things, what with all the spare time I had. So even now, when things are bothering me, or when things don't make sense, I need to read about them to try to understand them better."

"I see," said Chikaru, but her voice showed hints of warmth and even humor. "What did you research?"

At this point, Tamao finally opened her eyes and looked at Chikaru. For just a moment, she almost lost her train of thought as she stared

into those familiar brown eyes, but then she wrenched herself back on task. She turned back to her pile of materials and removed a thick folder from the mess. "These," she said, "are essays and studies about human sexuality, specifically on a growing understanding that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are *not* the same thing. For all the talk about the Kinsey scale between asexual, heterosexual and homosexual, it can be argued that there is a similar scale for *romantic* attraction, going between aromantic, heteroromantic, homoromantic, and all the stages in between."

She passed the folder to Chikaru, who accepted it wordlessly, then went back for another, thicker one, along with a number of loose printouts. "This is information from an organization called AVEN, the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network. A lot of it's in English, I'm afraid, but I think I remember you being pretty good with English?"

"I can get by," Chikaru nodded.

"Good. Now, one of the most important things they try to get across is that asexuality is rare, but there's nothing *wrong* with it. You're not defective, and you're not broken. You're just the way you are. I've also printed out some testimonials from asexual people across the world sharing their stories and experiences. A lot of them are even married, and happily so." She took a breath and said the next bit in a hurry, not wanting to sound like she was dropping obvious hints. "Some of them even have sex with their partners, or do sexual things, even if it's not something they seek out for themselves. Asexuality can be anywhere between being repulsed by sex to just being indifferent toward it, so those who lean toward the indifferent side have been known to indulge their partners a little, like the way you flirt with us, or the way you told us that it would be okay for us to fondle you sometimes. They find ways to meet in the middle with one another's wants and needs, and they make it work, because what they *do* have is more important than what they *don't* have."

Rather than pass this stack to Chikaru, Tamao elected to return it to the pile, then indicated the books. "These books are about the

concept of Boston Marriages, which involves women who live together without needing men, because their friendship and bond and *romance* is all they need. They had *incredibly* romantic partnerships that didn't *have* to be sexual to be *real* . Do you see? The separation of romance and sexuality isn't a *new* thing: it's been happening all along!"

Tamao took another centering breath and steeled herself for the finale. "Hazuki and I are in love with you, Chikaru," she said, raising one hand to her chest. "Now, I won't speak for her, even though I'm pretty sure I could, but I can say for myself that I would absolutely *love* to have sex with you, because I'm attracted to you, I love you, and I'm homosexual. I'm not going to deny that. But along with that, *even more* than that, I want to spend the rest of my life at your side, and I can't *bear* the idea of not having you in my life, because I'm also homoromantic, and *deeply* in love with you."

"Tamao-chan," Chikaru whispered.

"Hazuki told me once that you said you didn't consider romantic love and sex to be important to you," Tamao went on. "Now, you may very well be asexual, or you may be something else that's more difficult to label. That's fine. I understand that. You may never want us physically the way we want you. But there is *no way* that I'll *ever* believe that you don't feel romantic love for us. You've *shown* us that *every day* that we've been together. Now, can you look me in the eyes and tell me that you're not romantically in love with us?"

A few seconds passed, then Chikaru smiled and shook her head. For a moment Tamao felt as though her heart had stopped, but then Chikaru spoke, making it clear which part she was denying. "No, I can't say that. But does that get to be enough?"

"If we let it," Tamao whispered. She reached back to indicate all the stories she'd brought with her. "These people did. Why shouldn't we?"

Chikaru's smile widened. "You're adorable, Tamao-chan."

"Then adore me," Tamao blurted out. "Adore us both, and let us do the same for you."

Nothing was said for a while, then Chikaru closed her eyes. "The show will be over soon, my sweet."

"We'll be there."

From the beginning, the directorial team had agreed on the wisdom, or indeed the necessity, of having a traditional sitzprobe: a rehearsal where the cast, seated in several rows of chairs on the stage, would have their first chance to perform with the orchestra without worrying about staging or dialogue. There was always going to be something of a hurdle to get over when transitioning from piano accompaniment to full orchestration, so giving them the chance to focus solely on the music for a single rehearsal was vital.

It was also, Chikaru pondered from her seat in the very back of the performance hall, the point where her role as an active participant in the process was coming to an end. Up until tonight, she had conducted the rehearsals for Lulim's orchestra, but now the baton was back in the infinitely capable hands of Ōhara-sensei. Costuming was largely finished, other than some final detail work that would keep her busy for the next several nights. Ayame would be managing the final tech-week rehearsals, and Sayuri would be doing last-minute cram work with some of the soloists.

All of this left Chikaru more or less in the role this seat provided: that of an observer, watching and listening, offering what feedback she could. It was too late in the process for any more than that, and it was difficult to not feel a little helpless as she listened to the soloists and chorus struggle to regain their footing with the change in accompaniment.

Her eyes found the two empty seats in the front row, where the Étoile should have been sitting. Their absence hurt for several reasons, but

Sayuri was doing her best to fill in for them where she could, for the sake of keeping up some level of continuity.

After several songs, and about four times as many starts and stops, Ayame took the seat next to Chikaru. The Lulim secretary had spent the rehearsal thus far wandering the audience area, taking it in from several angles. "So what do you think?" she asked quietly.

Chikaru glanced down at the tablet of paper in her lap, briefly reviewing the notes she had been taking. "You've been more directly involved than I have, my dear. What do *you* think?"

"I think it's a mess," Ayame said bluntly, "though I'd never want to say so to Sayuri-chan, with the way she's already stressing out over it. Either we're going to need those microphones, or the orchestra's going to have to go down one or two dynamic levels across the board. Otherwise, we're never going to hear the soloists."

"And the staging?"

"We did our first run-through with costumes yesterday while you were with the orchestra, and just the addition of that was enough to make everyone forget their blocking. I know there's bound to be a learning curve, but this time it was more like a flatline."

"What do you think of our chances, then?"

Ayame let out a long sigh. "I know we have a week left, but… I just don't see how we're going to pull this off without a miracle."

"I see," Chikaru nodded slowly. "Well, then, I suppose it's a good thing we're in a theatre, where miracles are stock in trade."

"With all due respect," said Ayame, "after last year, you of all people should know how spectacularly wrong things can go on stage."

Chikaru had no words to counter this, so she said nothing.

Next: (P)reparations

(P)reparations

Baby, I said, it's all in our hands

Got to learn to respect what we don't understand

We are fortunate ones, fortunate ones I swear

-Indigo Girls

Part 23: (P)reparations

Treading as quietly as she could manage, Lilith crept along one of the many curved hallways of the Great Library, her back to the shelves and her hands out to either side, her fingers sliding along the spines of the books as she moved cautiously forward.

She had originally come down here following a hunch, but once she heard the echo of steps other than her own, she realized that something was amiss. She knew Eve's footfalls by heart, and this was most certainly *not* her.

Eventually, the alien footsteps stopped, and based on her current location, Lilith could guess their destination. After taking a deep breath, she gritted her teeth and charged.

She ended up startling the intruder just as he was pulling a book from the shelves, and before he could react, she had tackled him to the stone-tiled floor, leaving the book (*that* book, of course), to teeter on the shelf before falling with a soft *whump* .

Within seconds, Lilith had him pinned beneath her, both hands around his wrists and her full weight against his hips. "You," she scowled. "I should have known it was you. What are you *doing* here, Aaya?"

"Once again finding myself straddled by a powerful woman, it appears," Aaya sighed. "Your favored position, if memory serves?"

Lilith felt her face heat up. "How do you know about that?"

"My dear goddess, I've been cleaning up after you since practically the beginning of time. You learn a few things over the millennia."

With a growl, Lilith got up off of Aaya and went to pick up the book. "So, you want to tell me why you were messing with *this*, of all books?"

"Perhaps I'm just taking a personal interest in things?" Aaya smiled as he clambered to his feet.

"You're up to something, aren't you?"

"Usually."

If her hands hadn't been full with the book, Lilith would have been sorely tempted to slap that smirk off of his face. "You're messing with Hazuki-chan again, aren't you?"

"Again? Whatever do you mean, *again* ?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Something's different about her now, and I *know* you're involved somehow."

Aaya let out a long sigh, and his expression softened. "Lilith-sama, esteemed Keeper of the Great Library… have I ever, in the history of creation, done anything to truly harm your worlds, or their inhabitants?"

"No," Lilith admitted, grudgingly. "But the idea of you taking a 'personal interest' is *anything* but comforting."

"I *always* find myself drawn to a story," Aaya shrugged. "And you must admit, with the number of Eve's kindred living within these

pages, the potential for stories has increased by several orders of magnitude. Can you truly blame me?"

"If I want to."

"And anyhow," Aaya went on, "shouldn't you be the one taking a personal interest in this particular book at this particular time?"

Lilith narrowed her eyes at the seemingly young man. "What do you mean by that?"

"Hmm, I seem to recall a promise that needs to be kept?" he said, putting his head to one side and staring back at her. "A promise extracted from you, but a promise nevertheless?"

She almost asked how it was that he knew about *that*, as well, but with Ken-chan always acting as his eyes… "That's none of your business, you little interloper. Now, get out of here! I may not be able to permanently hurt you, but I can still have *lots* of fun seeing *just how much* I can manage to!"

"Ah, hostility then?" Aaya sighed. "Very well, goddess. I shall depart."

Aaya took one step sideways and vanished into nothing, but not before he gave her a last wink and a Cheshire-Cat smile. "For now…"

Lilith stood there for a few long moments until she was satisfied that he had departed, then set the book containing Hazuki and the others back upon its shelf.

Her fingertips lingered on the spine, and she felt for a particular *Souma* presence within.

"Damn it," she growled.

With all of three days before the cultural festival (and with it, the opera), Chikaru was not at all surprised to see that Sayuri was not even bothering to tie back her hair anymore, instead letting it hang loosely around her shoulders.

Today, Chikaru and her exhausted assistants were touring the backstage area in preparation for that evening's technical dress rehearsal, and here in the wings, at least, Chikaru was able to give some good news to her beleaguered Vice-President. "They were able to set it up for us this morning," she said, indicating the large flat-screen monitor mounted to the wall just offstage. "This is directly tied in to a camera pointed at the orchestra conductor's podium, so anyone standing here will be able to follow the baton and sing without being seen by the audience." She turned on the monitor to demonstrate, and it lit up with a picture of the unoccupied orchestra pit.

"Oh, that should be nice," Ayame nodded. "Don't you think, Sayuri-chan?"

"It'll help," Sayuri acknowledged. "I talked to the chorus last night, and we had a few of them who feel confident enough with the other parts that they'd be willing to join in from here. They'll lose some sound since they'll be singing from the wings, of course, but every bit should help at this point. I just wish now we hadn't separated the chorus rehearsals the way we did, so that everyone would be at least a little more familiar with each other's parts."

"We kind of *had* to, Sayuri-chan," Ayame reminded her.

"Indeed," Chikaru agreed. "We were already pushing things with the administrators, asking for as many formal rehearsal hours per student as we did. Still, it's nice to know that some of them enjoyed the music enough to cross-learn parts of it on their own."

They stepped out onto the stage, which was dark apart from a single tall lamp standing at center (a theater tradition, Chikaru had learned, though she was not certain of its origin). Tonight, one way or another,

they would have a more solid look at where they stood. Tonight there would be orchestra, and lighting, and microphones, and stage crew, and… well, everything except an audience. Chikaru let out a brisk sigh and heard it echo faintly back to her. "Well, my dears, are we ready?"

Neither of the other two said a word, so Chikaru tried something else. "Or at least as ready as we're likely to get?"

"I think it's going to be fine," Ayame ventured. "Amazing things can happen once the adrenaline kicks in."

"Now if only we had an epi-pen to give to the Étoile," Sayuri said under her breath.

"Sayuri-chan," Ayame sighed.

"Actually, there *is* one last thing," Sayuri went on, reaching into her skirt pocket to pull out a folded sheet of paper. "Mizushima-san gave this to me earlier."

"What is it?" Chikaru asked, taking the proffered note.

"Her suggested lyrics for a fourth verse to the Major-General song."

Chikaru unfolded the paper and read it.

She read it again.

She read it for a third time, still wondering if her eyes might be playing tricks on her. "She's not serious..?"

"She seemed pretty serious to me," Sayuri shrugged.

"We can't possibly allow it," said Chikaru, shaking her head.

"At this point, I honestly think we should just let her," Sayuri said with a somewhat grim smile. "At least that would give the audience something *else* to talk about after it's over."

"But she could get in trouble for this," Chikaru insisted. "Sayuri-chan, as the music director, *you* could get in trouble for this."

"Hmm, I suppose. Such are the hazards of being a satirist, though, don't you think?"

Chikaru re-folded the paper and handed it back to her Vice-President. "I'm sorry, but I'm putting my foot down. You have too much riding on this, Sayuri-chan. I'll find Mizushima-san and tell her so myself.

"Hey, don't hold back on *my* account," Sayuri frowned, with just a touch of heat in her voice. "I'm surprised at you, Chikaru. This is just the sort of sh!t-stirring that you're famous for."

"Perhaps," Chikaru frowned in reply. "But it's not about me, now, is it?

Kaori looked up from her textbook as she head a knock on her bedroom door. She waited for the usual call of "Kaori-chan?" from Miyuki, but to her surprise, it did not come.

Puzzled as to who else might be knocking, she got up from her desk, padded over to the door, and pulled it open, only to have her blood run cold as she saw who was standing at the other side.

"Good morning, Kaori-chan," said Lilith, giving her a somewhat strained smile. "May I come in?"

"Of… course," Kaori replied, stepping back to allow entry to the goddess who had once been her sister.

While she was not what anyone would describe as tall, Lilith still had to duck slightly to allow the Hat of the Keepers to clear the door-frame. Once inside, she took a brief look around. "My, my. This is all very 'guest room,' Kaori-chan. Barely a hint of your personality anywhere."

"Yes, well, I never quite felt comfortable settling in, seeing as I had no idea how long I'd be staying."

To Kaori's surprise, Lilith actually looked a little amused. "May I sit? I need to talk to you, and… it may take some time."

"Please," Kaori replied, indicating the "reading chair" which Miyuki had added to the room a few weeks prior. She was still not certain she actually wanted this conversation, but given that Lilith had been polite enough to ask to sit, not to mention polite enough to knock rather than simply materialize in the room, Kaori felt that it might be best to see where this led. She reclaimed her own seat at her desk and regarded the other woman with half-hooded eyes. "So… have you come to take me away?"

"No, not yet," said Lilith, shaking her head, "but this is… tangentially about that."

"Very well, then."

A few long moments passed before Lilith spoke again. "Before I get into the meat of things, let me start off by saying that I owe you an apology."

Kaori blinked. This, she had *definitely* not expected.

"Now… you may not be aware of this, Kaori-chan, but when we were last in your birth-world, you committed a grievous sin against me."

"When I hit Eve?"

To her surprise, Lilith gave her a tiny smirk. "No, it was a little bit after that, when you tried to extort us by threatening to use your untrained abilities to rewrite your own world."

Kaori had no reply to this. Lilith's voice was still conversational enough, but it was obvious that things could go pear-shaped in a hurry, and Kaori found herself tightening her grip on her chair.

"Let me make something very clear, Kaori-chan," Lilith went on. "At that moment, you were threatening one of my books. I would have been completely within my rights as Keeper of the Great Library to end your existence right then and there, and no one, not even Eve, would have been able to stop me."

A longer, thicker silence followed. "Then… why didn't you?" Kaori asked at last.

"For several reasons, really," Lilith replied. "First of all, it would have broken Eve's heart. Secondly, it would have done much the same to me: as much as you may not believe it, Kaori-chan, I truly enjoyed being your sister for all those years."

Memories of her lost past flickered through Kaori's mind's eye, along with the startling thought that she was not the only one who remembered them after all: the goddess sitting before her did as well.

"Along with that, though," Lilith continued, giving the much younger girl a sardonic smile, "I didn't do it because that was *exactly what you wanted me to do*, and I have my reputation as a contrarian bitch to keep up."

Kaori swallowed hard, but said nothing.

"I have many rules to follow as a Keeper," Lilith went on. "Along with that, though, I have many rights as a goddess. The rules are firm, but they also leave us wiggle room. If I were acting by the letter of the law, I would have struck you down where you stood that day. Instead, I used that wiggle room and chose another option."

"Out of mercy?" Kaori asked her.

Lilith shook her head. "Quite the opposite, actually. If I had wanted to be merciful, I would have ended you, and only *we* would have suffered at your loss. Instead, I gave you what you asked for - I wrote you out of your book - but I left you alive to see the

consequences of what you were threatening." She paused. "It wasn't pleasant, was it?"

"No," Kaori replied, feeling a roil of emotions deep within, but not daring to let them surface. Not yet.

"It has since been pointed out to me that my actions were on the vindictive side," Lilith continued, "and in retrospect, I can see the truth in that. I *had* to do something to answer the threat. As a Keeper, I should have erased you, but as your sister, I wanted to spare you, and a goddess, I wanted to teach you a hard lesson about what you are now. So for that, Kaori-chan, I owe you an apology."

"Wait," said Kaori in a tight voice. "Are you seriously apologizing for *not* killing me?"

"As ridiculous as it sounds, I am," Lilith nodded. "I acted out of a weird mix of sentimentality and vindictiveness rather than doing my job. Which, finally, brings me to the here and now."

Here, Lilith stared directly into Kaori's eyes, and the younger girl found that she could not force herself to look away. "I made a promise to someone," said the goddess, "that I would forgive you for your unknowing transgression and find you a new home. The thing is, I didn't make that promise to *you*, and that means you still have right of refusal. If you still wish for it, Kaori-chan, I could belatedly do my duty as a Keeper, and finish what you asked me to do that day."

A silence fell as Keeper and *Souma* -touched mortal stared one another down, but the voice that broke that silence belonged to neither of them. "Well, I *do* hope you realize that if you tried to hurt her, you'd have to go through *me* first."

Kaori tore her eyes away from Lilith to see Miyuki standing in the open doorway, arms crossed, shoulder leaned against the frame, her pose the very picture of nonchalance. "Miyuki-san!" she gasped, looking rapidly between her host and her guest. "How- how much did

you hear?" she asked, suddenly worried for the older woman's safety.

"Quite enough," Miyuki nodded, after which she turned a friendly smile to the Keeper. "You must be the Lilith I've heard so much about. Any friend of Kaori-chan's is welcome here, of course, though I would hope it goes without saying that no one will be 'ending' anyone in my home, if I have anything to say about it."

"Hello, Miyuki-chan," Lilith nodded, giving her a soft smile. "It's… actually very nice to see you again. But as it happens, *Kaori-chan* is the only one who has anything to say about it."

"Ah, but one moment, please," said Miyuki, holding up one finger. "Now, I may be an ignorant mortal here, but it sounds as though you're condemning Kaori-chan for breaking a rule that you did *not* warn her about, regarding a power that *you* gave to her in the first place. Forgive me for this comparison, Kaori-chan, but that sounds like handing a baseball bat to a toddler in a china shop and then getting angry when she breaks something. That hardly seems fair."

"Unfortunately, 'fair' does not always apply when you're dealing with the potential loss of untold trillions of lives."

"Perhaps, but as the ones who gave her the means to do that damage, with no set of instructions to *go with* those means, wouldn't you and your sister goddess share some of the responsibility?"

"Which is why I'm here," Lilith smiled, though irritation was clear in her voice.

"Wait, let me make sure I've got this absolutely straight," Kaori said in a low voice. "You're leaving it up to me, now? You're giving the choice of life or death back to me, after you originally left me alive just to *spite* me?"

Lilith bristled. "As I said, there were *several* reasons other than that. And it wasn't to *spite* you: it was to teach you some *respect* for this

power you have now."

"So you're ceding the decision to me?" Kaori went on. "You won't change your mind and decide it for me again later? My word on the matter is final, in spite of these past transgressions?"

"You've been cleared of all charges, and you have my word on that."

Kaori found that a bitter smile had come to her lips. "Well, then, I think the decision should be obvious."

She held the silence for a while, enjoying the idea of keeping Lilith in suspense, but then she glanced at Miyuki and saw the stricken look on her face. At that moment, she realized that the decision was anything *but* obvious to the woman who had taken her in during her darkest moments.

"I'm going to stay alive *as long as I possibly can,* " she said, directing this at Miyuki, then locked eyes with the goddess. "Just to spite *you* ."

For a short but satisfying moment, Lilith looked completely gobsmacked, but then she let out a bark of laughter. "That's the sister I remember. So be it, then."

Kaori chanced another look at Miyuki, and saw that while her nonchalant pose had not changed during any of this, she had now closed her eyes and was biting her lower lip.

"Now then," Lilith went on. "It may interest you to know that in the time since you came to this world, a significant number of your *Souma* sisters have been very keen on looking out for your well-being, up to and including one of them committing *another* act of goddess-extortion on your behalf." She paused and visibly pondered this for a moment. "Well… *mostly* on your behalf, to be fair. I think there was a little bit of a dominance-play going on there as well, but that's not important right now. The point is that each and every one of the sisters you met that day at Shizuma's vacation house has

asked either me or Eve when we're going to find you a new home and a new life, and even tried to use divine favors to make that happen."

Now it was Kaori's turn to be gobsmacked. "They… they what?"

"Every one of them is looking out for you, Kaori-chan," Lilith nodded. "To be honest, I couldn't figure out why: none of them knew you in your original world, after all, and they didn't owe you anything."

Kaori had been thinking much the same thing. What was she to them?

"Now, as I think you already know, the Tamao-chan of this world has the same kind of *Souma* as you. What you don't know is that after she helped perform a service for the Great Library, we owed her a reward, and she asked me for lessons."

"On how to use the power?" Kaori asked.

"No," Lilith smiled. "On how to *avoid* using it *unwisely* ."

Kaori nodded. That sounded sensible, just like the Tamao she remembered from her own world.

"It wasn't until the first of those lessons, though, that she told me *why* she chose that as her boon: it was because of *you* ."

"Me?" Kaori gasped. "But… how? Why?"

"It was the way you described how it felt when I pulled you fully from your world," Lilith explained. "That was when she truly realized the scope of what Maker *Souma* can do, so she asked for my help before she could make a mistake like you nearly did. So you see, Kaori-chan, your threat to your book ended up having an unexpected positive effect going forward."

"I… I had no idea," Kaori whispered.

"Another reason I came here today," Lilith nodded, rising to her feet. "I believe you're in contact with Tamao-chan, yes?"

"I am."

"Well, I'm going to continue to give her the lessons she asked for. I'll leave the rest to you. I'm sure she'd be happy to return the favor you did for her, even if it *was* done unknowingly."

Lilith turned and gave Miyuki a polite bow. "Thank you for having me in your home, Miyuki-chan."

"It was my pleasure," said Miyuki dryly. "Though I would appreciate it if you used the front door next time. Or at least allowed me to hang up your hat."

"Sorry, the hat stays," Lilith smirked. "Well, Kaori-chan, I'm glad we had this little chat. I'll be in touch."

The room filled with a brilliant green, and Lilith vanished from sight.

Kaori took a deep breath, quickly realizing that she probably owed Miyuki a bit of an explanation, but when she looked up, she saw that her host had come into the room and was standing beside her chair.

"Stand up, Kaori-chan," Miyuki said in a soft, slightly broken voice.

Confused by this, Kaori did so, only for Miyuki to wrap her arms around the smaller girl and pull her into a tight embrace. "Mi- Miyuki-san?"

"Kaori-chan," Miyuki said, very close to her ear, "I am well aware of the fact that the day will come when you leave, and that I will likely never see you again. As difficult as it has been, I have made peace with that unfortunate truth. That being said, I will thank you to never, *ever* scare me like that again."

"Miyuki-san," Kaori whispered, reaching to hold the achingly familiar woman in reply.

They were out of time. Even Chikaru had to admit it.

The night before the festival found the Lulim president holed up in a rehearsal room along with Sayuri and Amane, desperately trying to wring out some cram practice time for the Étoile. The final dress rehearsal had ended earlier in the day, and the news had not been good: even with a microphone, Amane's vocals were shaky at best, inaudible at worst.

As the Sergeant of Police, Amane was called upon to sing in a total of three numbers, including the finale. The second of those (a call-response song between the Sergeant and the chorus of police) could still be cut even at this eleventh hour, and Chikaru felt herself on the verge of making that hard decision, as much as she hated to do it. The other two, however, had to stay, so they were trying to focus on those, turning this last-minute practice into an endless repetition of the same lines, with little change in the Étoile's ability to hit the right notes with anything resembling confidence. Sayuri would demonstrate the line on the piano, Amane would not quite get it, Chikaru would offer assurances, rinse, repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

In the end, it was Amane who snapped first.

"Don't you get it yet?" the Étoile growled after another botched melody line. "I can't *do* this! Just drop me from the cast, and one of you go on for me. Say that I got last-second laryngitis. Say that I got hit by a bus. I don't care, just do this without me!"

"Étoile-sama…" Chikaru sighed.

"No, don't you 'Étoile-sama' me," Amane scowled at her. "I'm not *you*, Chikaru! This may come as a surprise, but we're not all like you! We can't all keep up with you and your whims!"

Chikaru bit back on a reply, deciding that she would take her punishment.

"We could have done a play," Amane ranted. "Just a normal play, like everyone before us has done. But you don't operate like that, do you? Everything has to be different! Everything has to have your stamp on it! Far be it for Minamoto Chikaru to do something *ordinary*, even if that means putting the rest of us through Hell to get there!"

" *That's enough!"*

Along with the shout came the clatter of the rehearsal piano's bench hitting the floor, and both Amane and Chikaru turned to see that a furious Sayuri had risen to her feet, and was staring daggers at the Étoile.

"Sayuri, please," said Chikaru.

The Lulim Vice-President shook her head, but her eyes never left Amane. "No, Chikaru, not even for you. I don't care if she *is* the Étoile; I will *not* let her speak to you like that."

For her part, Amane looked stunned, so Sayuri took a step closer and went on, her voice now dangerously low and tremulous. "Do you want to know *why* Chikaru decided to do a light opera, Étoile-sama? The *real* reason?"

"You don't have to do this…" said Chikaru. *Let me take the heat. Please.*

Sayuri ignored her and went on. "She's not doing this for herself! This isn't some kind of ego trip! She did this for me and Ayame! This was her gift to us before we graduate next spring!"

Amane blinked, still in apparent shock at the outburst from Chikaru's normally quiet assistant. "I… don't understand."

"Of course you don't, because she didn't *tell* you. Here's the thing: Ayame and I are trying to get into a prestigious conservatory, so we can go on studying music and dance and theater, but they won't even *look* at us unless they have a demonstration of our work.

Chikaru got wind of this, and being Chikaru, she completely scrapped her original plans to do a 'normal play,' like you would have wanted, and gave us this opportunity to maybe, *just maybe*, take an otherwise impossible step closer to our dreams. Don't you *dare* talk to her like she did this out of selfishness, or out of ego! I will f*cking *fight* you first!"

"I…" Amane managed, completely aghast, but that was all she could get out before Sayuri continued.

"On paper, Chikaru is the Director, but she's been ninety-five percent hands-off. She's letting us do this *our* way, and she's set it up so that *we'll* get all the credit if it succeeds, and *she'll* take all the heat if it fails. But! There is *one* place in particular where she overrode my decisions all along, and that concerns *you*, Étoile-sama. If it had been up to me, you would have had an understudy from day one, and we'd be going with that understudy tomorrow. Chikaru didn't allow that, though, and do you want to know why?"

She took another step closer, until she was standing almost nose-to-nose with the seated Amane. "It's because Chikaru, for some reason I can't for the *life* of me imagine right now, *believes* in you."

For a while, nothing more was said, then Sayuri stepped back and bent down to right the fallen piano bench. "So, you can give me a thousand demerits for mouthing off to the Étoile now, if you want. Whatever. I think I'm beyond caring at this point."

"Amane," Chikaru said then, "while I perhaps would not have used such colorful language to say it, Sayuri *is* telling the truth. I was the one who insisted that we keep you in this role, because no one knows better than I that you can *command* the stage when you need to. For all your reluctance, you did it in *Carmen*, and I still believe you can do it here."

The Étoile ran both hands over her face, then gave Chikaru an exhausted, almost helpless look. "That's just it, though: In *Carmen*, I didn't have to *sing* ."

Even as part of her mind searched for the next (probably empty) reassurances, another thought suddenly dawned on Chikaru with such force, and such clarity, that for a moment she forgot to breathe.

Could it actually be that simple?

"Sayuri, Étoile-sama," she whispered, "I think I have an idea…"

Next: Festival *(no, for real this time!)*

Festival

I was losing all my senses, I was losing all control

It was getting so offensive, now you want me back for more

And I just won't go

-Indigo Girls

Part 24: Festival

It wasn't until four or five hours in that Momomi fully realized that this was going to be her last Astraea cultural festival with Kaname.

The finality of it hit her, in all places, while they were at one of the game booths, trying to shoot five free-throws in a row to win some ridiculous and otherwise forgettable prizes. They had gone to this very booth during their first year, and Kaname had spent an inordinate amount of time trying to make those shots, just to get Momomi a silly little phone charm. In the end, she finally managed it, and had presented the bauble to her with all the tongue-in-cheek drama of an engagement ring, and it was at that moment that Momomi realized that her roommate was not only into her, but would probably do anything she asked.

Now, five years had passed, and that awkward, surly girl had become the tall, athletic, cocksure woman standing before her, this time making all five shots on her first try. And just like before, she asked Momomi what prize she wanted, then presented this year's phone charm on one knee, head bowed and arms outstretched. "Your treasure, my lady."

"You do me great honor, goofball," Momomi giggled, taking it from her. "Now get up already. It's embarrassing to see you like that."

"Alas, far be it for me to embarrass a lovely lady," Kaname sighed, rising to her feet, then reaching down to brush off her knee.

"You've had enough practice at it, that's for sure."

Kaname visibly deflated. "You wound me, madam."

"You'll recover." *You always do* .

They resumed their stroll around the festival grounds, and after a companionable silence, Kaname looked over at her. "Did you have a good time today?" she smiled softly.

The urge to keep up the banter was strong, but as she had been doing more and more lately, Kaname was speaking with her guard down, so Momomi answered honestly. "I did. Thank you. But why are you talking like it's over? We've still got… what, most of an hour before call?"

"We do," Kaname agreed, "but I need to get there early. There's something… important I need to do before the show."

"Oh," said Momomi, genuinely surprised. Kaname had not mentioned anything about this before. "Do you want me to come with?"

"Nah, stay and enjoy the festival a little longer. This is… something I need to do on my own."

"Well… okay."

Kaname looked into her eyes, then, and Momomi was quite sure that her longtime girlfriend was sorely tempted to kiss her right then and there, but even she would not dare to do so in the middle of the cultural festival. Instead, she gave her a knowing smile and a slight bow of the head. "I'll see you in the dressing room."

"See you there."

With a last smirk, Kaname went on her way, leaving Momomi alone to ponder her next move. It would probably be best to hit one or two of the food stalls to fuel up before the show, since no food was allowed backstage.

She had just made up her mind and headed off in search of some takoyaki when there was a tap at her left shoulder. She looked around, but no one was there.

"Surprise!" came a wholly unexpected voice from her right.

Momomi whirled around, and her eyes bugged as she took in the sight of someone who was so completely out of context here that she could not manage more than a gasp of shock.

"What's the matter, Momomi-chan?" Kazuharu winked. "Cat got your tongue?"

Kazuharu was here.

Her goddamn *fiancé* was here.

On Astraea Hill.

" *What are you doing here?!"* she finally managed in a high-pitched hiss.

"Thought I'd surprise you." he shrugged.

Trying to look as nonchalant as possible (even though her mind was whirring with panic), Momomi took a quick look around to see if anyone had noticed them, *particularly* Kaname. Luckily, they seemed to be in the clear for now. "Follow me," she said. "But try not to *look* like you're following me."

With a confused Kazuharu a few steps behind, Momomi darted toward a covered booth that had closed up shop earlier. She slipped

in through a gap in the tarps, looked around to make sure no one else was inside, then waved Kazuharu in after her.

"Gotta say, this isn't quite the welcome I was hoping for?" he said, his ever-present smile now looking a bit strained.

"Seriously, what are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I was hoping to see your show, actually. Imagine my dismay when I was told that it was restricted to students and family members only. I considered asking if betrothal counted as family, but I didn't want to press."

"You - you didn't tell anyone we were engaged, did you?" she blurted out, only then realizing how that must have sounded to him.

"Momomi-chan, what's wrong?" he asked, the smile finally fading. "Was this a bad idea? Should I not have come?"

"No, it's not that…" she sighed, even though it was. She took a slow breath in an attempt to get her heart to stop hammering. "It's just… how can I say this..?"

To her surprise, Kazuharu gently took her left hand in his, looking for a ring that wasn't there. "No one knows you're engaged, do they?" he said softly.

"It's… it has nothing to do with you, it's this school," she said. "People… treat you differently if they know you're engaged." She reasoned that this was not entirely a lie, though there were definitely specific people on that list.

"Okay," he nodded. He visibly pondered his next words before saying them. "Does it… have anything to do with the girl you were with earlier?"

Panic returned with a vengeance, so Momomi did what came naturally in an effort to cover it up. "What, were you stalking me?"

she said with an expression somewhere between a smile and a sneer. "Am I engaged to a stalker?"

"No, no, not at all!" he insisted, waving his free hand between them. "I only got here about fifteen minutes ago. I finally found you at the basketball hoop, but you and that other girl looked like you were having fun, and I didn't want to interrupt."

Having fun? Momomi wondered if he had also seen the way Kaname was eye-f*cking her there at the end. "She's my roommate," she said, keeping the practiced sarcasm on her face. "We've hung out at the festival together every year since seventh grade. It's our little roomie tradition, that's all. Now get your mind out of the gutter, yuri-boy."

"Okay, okay," he laughed, looking away to cover his blush. "Look, I get it, I really do. You're still in high school for a few more months, and you should enjoy it as much as you can. If people are gonna be weird and wreck it for you, then they don't have to know. Whatever's best for you."

"I appreciate that," she smiled more genuinely, relieved that he was not going to press the issue.

Kazuharu released her hand, then briskly slapped both of his own together and grinned. "Anyway, are we still on for tomorrow morning? The meeting with the tailors?"

"Yes, I got permission to be away," Momomi confirmed. "Gives me an excuse to skip Mass, too. I heard your driver will be here at eight?"

"Well, yessss…" said Kazuharu, his grin fading into what was probably supposed to be a sly smile, though being Kazuharu, it ended up more goofy than anything else. "But I was wondering…"

"You were wondering..?"

"Are you doing anything tonight after your show?"

Momomi thought about this. "Not really? There's the bonfire, but… nothing I *have* to be at. Why?"

"Well, mmmmaybe, I was thinking, you'd let me take you out to dinner tonight? Then afterward we could drive back to the estate and you could spend the night, so we can get an early start tomorrow?"

"Oh, really?" Momomi laughed mockingly, arching one eyebrow at him. "Spend the night? And what do you intend to *do* with me if I… *spend the night?* "

He leaned in more closely. "I intend," he said slowly, the soft smile never leaving his face, "to take you home… walk you to your guest room… kiss you chastely on the hand… and wish you a pleasant sleep." Here, the grin returned, and he leaned back. "Come on, Momomi-chan, give me a *little* credit. We're not married *yet* ."

Not for the first time, Momomi found herself wondering if this guy was for real.

Still… maybe a bit more damage control would help in the long run.

"Okay," she nodded. I'll meet you at the main gates after I get changed."

"Awesome! I'll be waiting!"

At that moment, several booths away, Hazuki was for the first time enjoying a cultural festival as part of a group, wandering the booths with Tamao, Nagisa, Chihaya and Noriko. Conscious of their relatively imminent call time to meet backstage, they were trying to cram in as much festival as possible in the remaining forty minutes.

It was the first time, really, that Hazuki had spent any social time with Miator's "old married" couple, as the prickly Noriko and long-suffering

Chihaya were colloquially known. As stressful as the opera had been at times, and as difficult as Chikaru's isolation was for her and Tamao both, Hazuki could at least be grateful for this chance to get to know a wider circle of her fellow students. Noriko, especially, had proven to be an absolute fountain of borderline inappropriate humor and sarcasm (and frequently crossing that border, truth be told), keeping things loose with a quick wit and an acid tongue. Hazuki could not remember the last time she had laughed this much in the company of more than one or two people, but it was probably somewhere in the neighborhood of never.

Even with this, though, it ached a little that Chikaru was not here to share this with them, especially since this would be her last festival before she graduated. She tried not to dwell too much on it, but it could not be denied that the Chikaru-shaped hole in her life was never far from her thoughts.

Then, as though those thoughts had somehow brought her here, there came an unexpected voice from beside them. "Good afternoon, ladies. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

As one, the quintet turned to see Chikaru giving them a pleasant smile (though to Hazuki's eyes, it looked a little strained).

"Chikaru..!" Tamao smiled hesitantly.

"Herr Direktor!" said Noriko. "Let me guess - you're here to tell me you changed your mind, and you'll let me do my fourth verse after all."

"We've been over this, Mizushima-san," Chikaru said patiently.

"I'm just saying, *you're* the one who asked for satire…"

Chikaru cleared her throat. "Anyway," she continued, "I'm sorry to interrupt you all, but I was wondering if I could borrow Hazuki-chan from you? I have need of her… expertise on something."

"Ah, you need something from a really high shelf, then?" Hazuki smiled, even though what she wanted to say was more along the lines of *yes yes yes, borrow me, I miss you, I'm yours, do anything you want with me…*

"Something like that," Chikaru giggled, and for just a moment, that familiar twinkle was visible again in her tired eyes. She then bowed to the group. "I'll see the rest of you backstage shortly, then?"

"We'll be there!" said Nagisa brightly.

Tamao looked a bit lost, obviously wanting to go with them, but not wanting to ask. Hazuki took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "See you soon?"

"Soon," Tamao nodded.

Chikaru led her off, then, and Hazuki was not at all surprised to find the pair of them making a beeline for the theater. Something was wrong, obviously, but she waited for Chikaru to give the details in her own time.

Instead, to her surprise, Chikaru gave her a sidelong smile. "Alone at last, eh?"

"Hmm, not the way I hoped, but I won't argue."

"Are you… well, Hazuki-chan?"

"I'm hanging in there. More importantly, are *you* okay?"

"More importantly?" Chikaru repeated.

"Well, to *me* it's more important," Hazuki sighed. "I still get to be worried about you, don't I?"

"Thank you," Chikaru said in a voice just above a whisper.

They entered the theater via a side door, then headed toward a stairwell that led up to the control booth overlooking the stage. "So," Chikaru said carefully, "I… can't help noticing that I haven't… *overheard* anything from you and Tamao-chan in a while. Is there anything wrong? Or is the dormitory probation just making things difficult?"

"Overheard?" Hazuki repeated, but then Chikaru gave her a Look, and she blushed slightly at the realization. "Ah, that. Um… yeah, the probation wasn't helping, but… we made a mutual decision to tone it down for now. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

"Hazuki-chan… please tell me the two of you aren't abstaining for my sake?"

"Would that be such a bad thing?"

Chikaru sighed. "My darling, I've told you before: never delay a pleasurable activity on my account."

"Well, maybe we *want* to," Hazuki replied, softly.

Apart from another small sigh, Chikaru said nothing, so Hazuki did her best to get back on task. "So, why do you need my expertise?"

"Yes…" Chikaru grimaced. "Hazuki-chan, I know you're at least fairly adept with computers, but how are you with electronics in general? I know your parents work for Sonny, but that doesn't make you an expert by association…"

"I can get by," said Hazuki as they arrived at the door to the booth. "Why? What happened?"

Chikaru stopped in front of the door, turned, and looked the taller girl in the eye. "The sound board is dead."

Hazuki blinked, hoping that she had not heard that correctly. "The what now?"

"The mixing board, where the sound tech controls all the microphones. It's completely dead. Our tech, Sakiya-chan, is trying to scrounge up one of the smaller ones from the performance halls at Lulim, but I'd appreciate another set of eyes on the problem, if you could."

"I'm on it," Hazuki nodded grimly. "It's not my forte, but I can look it over."

With a last nod, Chikaru opened the door for them, and Hazuki followed her into the booth, where Sayuri and Ayame were already up to their elbows in cables as they pulled audio patches from the built-in sound console. Ayame was the first to notice them, and she managed a ragged smile. "Hello, Azuma-san! Welcome to our nightmare!"

"So what level of 'dead' are we dealing with here?" Hazuki asked, looking down at the endless dials and sliders.

"Well, we came up to do our sound and lighting check," said Ayame, wrapping masking tape around the end of one the cables and marking it with a pen. "Lighting was fine, thank God, but when I went to turn on the sound board, it made a sad little noise, and then… nothing."

"Was there a pop? Maybe a breaker got tripped."

"That's what I was thinking," Sayuri nodded. "But I want to get everything unplugged before we try that. I think the breaker box is out in the hallway, behind us."

"I'll go look for it," said Hazuki, hurrying out past Chikaru and scanning the hallway for a wall panel. She found one, but to her dismay, it was locked. "Anyone got the key for this thing?" she called back.

After a few seconds, Chikaru leaned out of the door and tossed Hazuki a keyring. "This was hanging up inside. Here's hoping?"

"You got that right," Hazuki muttered as she tried several of the keys in succession. Finally, one fit, and she opened the small metal door. "Aha!" she called. "Yeah, it looks like one of the smaller breakers went."

"Okay, give me a second," came Ayame's voice from within. "There we go, all the leads are out, and it's powered off. Can you reset that one, please?"

Hazuki flipped the errant breaker back to the ON position. "Ready!"

"Thank you! Turning on the console in 3… 2… 1… on!"

Immediately, the breaker tripped again, and Hazuki swore she heard something spark. "It didn't hold," she called. "Also… I'm no electrician, but I'm pretty sure it shouldn't be smelling like this."

There was a curse from the booth that sounded a lot like it came from Sayuri. "Okay, leave that one off," Ayame sighed. "I don't think we're getting this thing back."

There came the sound of labored footsteps from down the hall, and Hazuki turned to see a short, black-haired Lulim senior she did not know by name. The older girl was struggling to carry a mixing board which, while indeed smaller than the built-in console inside, was still an incredibly awkward burden. Hazuki hurried to give the girl a hand, and together they maneuvered it in through the doorway.

"Well done, Sakiya-chan," Chikaru smiled at the girl as they placed the replacement board as close to the original as they could manage.

"It was the best I could find," Sakiya grimaced. "I don't think it has enough channels, though: I think we'll have to dump the stage mikes. Either that, or we won't be able to use all the body-mikes."

"Stage mikes it is," Sayuri said with a grim smile. "I hope the chorus is in good voice tonight."

Sakiya, meanwhile, was making an effort to reach under the main console with a power cord, but she was obviously having trouble plugging it in. Finally, with a growl of frustration, she withdrew her arm and passed the three-pronged end of the cable to Hazuki. "Azuma-san, I'm about five centimeters too short for this. Would you mind terribly?"

"I told you we'd need your expertise," Chikaru giggled.

"So you did," Hazuki chuckled. She took the cable from the technician, crouched down, and reached in to secure the plug in place. "Got it."

"Okay, let me try powering it on with nothing in it," Sakiya nodded. She flipped a switch, and… nothing. "Crap."

"Wait, do you think that plug might be on the bad circuit?" said Ayame.

"Oh, good call! Azuma-san, can you see any more outlets down there?"

Hazuki flattened herself against the floor to try to get a better look. "There's… one over here, further to the left, under… whatever this part is."

"The lighting console," the tech supplied. "Can we reach over to there?"

"I… think so…" Hazuki grunted as she once again reached in with the cable. For a moment it looked like it was going to be a hair short, but luckily, she just managed to get it plugged into the free outlet. "Okay, it's in," she said as she pushed herself back to her feet.

"Say a quick prayer to the theater gods," said Sakiya, then switched it on.

For all of a second and a half, the replacement board lit up, but before anyone could manage a sigh of relief, there came another distant pop, and it went dead again.

Only this time, to their collective horror, so did pretty much everything else in the booth, including the lighting console.

"Oh, f*ck me running," Sayuri whispered.

Hazuki quickly stepped back out into the hall and checked the electrical panel. "Okay, this time it looks like the main breaker for the booth went," she called back. "Do you want me to turn it back on?"

"One second!" Sakiya called. "I'm going to power everything down first!"

"Okay, say when."

After a short pause, Sakiya poked her head out into the hallway. "Cross your fingers and hit it."

Hazuki flipped the main breaker, then followed the other girl back into the booth. "Right, then, let's see just how screwed we are," Sakiya said briskly. "Lighting first."

She powered up the lighting controls, and they came right on. "Checks out," she nodded to herself as she ran her hands over a few of the sliders. "At least we won't be in the dark. Do you want me to try sound again?"

"Do you think it'll work?" Chikaru asked.

Sakiya looked at her school president and shook her head. "Honestly, I wouldn't want to risk it, at least until we can get an actual electrician in here to look things over. I think right now lighting and sound are an either-or prospect."

Chikaru nodded, then looked to their music director. "Sayuri-chan?"

"Obviously we can't go without lights," she said, crossing her arms and staring fixedly at nothing. She chewed her lip for a moment, then looked up at Hazuki. "Azuma-san, during the last two tech rehearsals, when the microphones were hot… could you really *tell* that they were, from up on the stage?"

Hazuki shook her head. "Honestly? Not at all. All I could hear was the orchestra and the other singers around me."

Sayuri nodded slowly. "Then we go without, but we don't tell anyone the sound's off. We mike them up, just like in rehearsal, and we tell them to sing out. Azuma-san, please don't tell *anyone*, not even Suzumi-san."

"Wait a second," Ayame put in. "With no sound, does that mean the stage crew's headsets will be out? And what about the speakers in the dressing rooms?"

"Should be fine," Sakiya waved. "Those are all controlled by a separate system backstage."

At that moment, another Lulim student that Hazuki did not recognize rushed into the booth. "Chikaru-sama," she bowed. "Um, Kenjō-senpai needs to see you in the dressing room. She says it's important."

"Kaname?" said Chikaru, exchanging glances with Hazuki.

"Don't ask me," Hazuki shrugged. "I only saw her in passing today."

"Well, I should see what this is about, then," Chikaru sighed, before turning to her assistants. "More than ever, my friends, I am thankful for your efforts and your hard work. Let's do our best to make this happen."

"We've got this," Ayame nodded, but she did not look particularly confident.

Chikaru bowed to them and departed. As she passed Hazuki, she smiled and silently mouthed "thank you," then reached up to give her shoulder a tiny squeeze before she set off down the hallway.

Even though there had been no *Souma* connection through her uniform coat, Hazuki's shoulder still tingled from this brief contact, and she realized that this was the first time that Chikaru had actually touched her in… well, entirely too long. For a moment, she felt strongly compelled to follow, but then Sakiya's voice brought her short. "Azuma-san, I know it's rude of me to be impressing you into crew duty when we've only just formally met, but can you spare a few minutes to help me with a lighting check? I'm a little nervous after what just happened."

"Um, of course," Hazuki said with a slight bow of the head.

"Don't keep her for long, please," Ayame reminded them. "Dressing room call is in twenty minutes."

Tsubomi liked to consider herself a relatively simple girl with relatively simple pleasures. One of these was strawberry shaved ice.

So it was that she, Chiyo and Kagome found themselves back at the shaved ice stand for the third time that day, killing time while waiting for Kizuna and Remon to finish up their shift at the maid cafe and come join them. Then it would be a sweep of the food stalls before heading to the theater to watch Yaya-senpai and the others.

Hopefully, she considered, the presence of the Lulim third-years might also perk up the conversation level. Kagome had been her normal silent self, and Chiyo simply did not have much to say other than to wonder how Nagisa-senpai and Tamao-senpai would look on stage. The rumor mill had been working overtime going into the festival, with most of said rumors being about the strong possibility for the forthcoming performance to be a massive failure, and Chiyo was a little ball of concern for her revered senpai.

"I was really hoping they might get another shot at being Étoile," said Chiyo, "but if the opera is terrible, won't it hurt their chances?"

"Shouldn't matter," Tsubomi said around a mouthful of ice. "Hikari-sama would have to step down for them to even have a chance, and I don't see that happening."

"Even with Amane-sama graduating?"

"Yeah, once you're Étoile you get to keep the position, even if the other one graduates."

"Oh," Chiyo blinked. "I guess I thought the Étoile-sen was a yearly thing. Does she get to pick a new partner?"

"Not sure," Tsubomi considered. "Probably not, though. 'Cause then Hikari-sama could pick someone younger than her, and when she graduates that other girl could pick someone younger than *her*, and so on, and then Spica would be able to keep the position forever."

"I wonder if…" Chiyo began, but she trailed off as a dour-looking man Tsubomi did not recognize stepped up to them. He was of medium height, stocky, slightly balding, and wore what looked like a permanent expression of disgust. He spared Tsubomi and Chiyo the barest of glances before turning his attention to Kagome…

Who, Tsubomi noticed to her horror, was staring up at the man, her eyes wide and unblinking, completely frozen in place.

"Kagome-chan?" the man said in a deep growl.

"Pa - Papa?" the tiny Lulim girl managed.

Chiyo let out an almost-silent gasp, while Tsubomi found herself likewise frozen with sheer panic.

"We're leaving, Kagome-chan," the man said through gritted teeth. "You will *obey* me."

He held out one hand, and Kagome, still looking like a deer in headlights, reached out tentatively in response. Her father closed the distance and grabbed her by the wrist, then half-dragged her to her feet and pulled her roughly away.

"Chiyo," Tsubomi whispered, "get help. Find a teacher. Find one of the sisters. Or.. everyone's probably at the theater by now; go there and get Kenjō-senpai or Hazuki-senpai, or… just get *someone* ."

"What are *you* going to do?" Chiyo squeaked.

Tsubomi clenched her jaw. "I'm going to follow them."

Chikaru found Kaname sitting alone in the principals' dressing room, still in her uniform, but with one shoe and sock removed, and a look of pain and annoyance on her face. "Kaname?"

The former Spica president looked up and gave her a mirthless smile. "Well, you know what they say: karma's a bitch."

"What happened?"

"I came down early to get dressed," Kaname winced, "and being the very picture of grace that I am, I turned my ankle coming into the room." She gingerly put her bare foot against the floor, then made a face as she tried to put weight on it. "I've twisted it before on the track, but this feels a lot worse. It might be a full-on sprain."

"You… sprained your ankle," Chikaru said back to her.

Kaname sucked a breath between her teeth as she took her foot in both hands and tried the rotate the ankle in question. "Anyway, you know this show backwards and forwards and every other way, right? I'm not *that* much taller than you, so you should fit into my costume okay. Might be a little snug across the chest, but that can't be helped."

"Kaname, what are you talking about?" Chikaru asked.

"I won't be able to go on like this," Kaname sighed noisily. "If anyone can pull off a last-second Pirate King, it's you. Don't *even* try to tell me that you don't have all the lines and all the songs for all the parts memorized. Even I know that you don't do this kind of thing halfway."

Chikaru stared at the seated girl for a while, feeling a tiny smile coming on as she did. She then crossed the room, knelt down, and placed both hands over Kaname's bare ankle, even as the other girl tried to pull it away. "Whoa, whoa! Don't touch! It's…"

It only took the tiniest movement of *Souma* to confirm what Chikaru had already suspected, and she smiled a little more knowingly as she looked up at Kaname. "You did *not* turn your ankle."

"Dammit, I *knew* you were gonna do that," Kaname growled, as she set her completely uninjured foot back on the floor and sank down in her chair.

"And yet you tried anyway," Chikaru said softly. "Thank you."

Kaname rubbed one hand over her face, then looked anywhere but at Chikaru. "That… wasn't supposed to happen to you, you know."

"I do."

"And I'm being serious here: you can still go on for me. I can't fix what happened last year, but…"

"It's okay," Chikaru assured her. "I really do appreciate the attempt, Kaname. More than you know. As it happens, though, I have another role to play in tonight's production, even though it won't be on the stage."

"You do?" Kaname asked, furrowing her brow.

Before Chikaru could say any more, though, there came the sound of running footsteps and gasps for breath from the hallway, and

Chiyo suddenly burst into the dressing room, looking like she'd just sprinted all the way from Miator. "Chikaru-sama!" she panted. "Kenjō-senpai! Ka- Kagome needs you!"

"What happened to her?" Chikaru asked, feeling her blood turn to ice.

Chiyo took a few gulps of air before turning her terrified face to both of them. "It's her father! He's here! I think he's come to take her away!"

There was a pause of no more than a heartbeat, and then Kaname jammed her shoe back on. "Well, Chikaru, you might have to go on for me tonight after all."

"Why's that?"

"Because I might be in jail for murder."

Chikaru shook her head. "Not if I get to him first…"

It was getting to the point that waiting for help was no longer an option.

Fortunately, Tsubomi had managed to flag down Kizuna and Remon (right on schedule, and still in their maid outfits) shortly after Chiyo had dashed off, and together, the three of them tailed Kagome and her father all the way to the front gates, working out the bare bones of a plan as they went.

"We gonna do this?" Kizuna whispered.

"It's now or never," Tsubomi nodded.

"Yeah, but what do we do once we separate them?" Remon hissed.

"We'll figure that out when we get there. Let's go."

After saying this, Tsubomi pressed her cup of partially-melted shaved ice into Kizuna's hand, then followed the Lulim third-years as they jogged forward, looking every bit their normal bouncy selves. "Ya-ho, Kaaaaaaagomeeeee!" Kizuna called in a singsong voice. "One of the stands has funnel-cakes! Let's go try some!"

"Kagome, I haven't gotten you the takoyaki I promised!" Remon waved as they dashed in front of the girl and her father. "Come on, sweetie, let's go!"

"Hey, that's no fair!" Kizuna pouted, hands on hips. "I get to treat Kagome first!"

"What idiot eats funnel cakes before takoyaki?" Remon snorted. "Come on, Kagome, let's go eat!"

"Ooh, then we can go try the shooting gallery!"

"Or the archery range!"

"Or the basketball hoops!"

"Ha! Betcha I can shoot more than you can!"

"Can not!"

"Can too!"

As the other two girls continued their improvisation in front of the still shell-shocked Kagome and her on-the-verge-of-exploding father, Tsubomi came around from the opposite side, treading as quietly as she could manage. Once she was in range, she caught Kizuna's eye and gave her a single nod.

"Whoops!" Kizuna said suddenly, tripping over seemingly nothing and sending the remaining strawberry-flavored slush flying… only to have it splatter onto Byakudan, specifically hitting the hand that was keeping hold of his daughter.

The moment the man snatched his hand back with a curse, Tsubomi dropped down and threw herself at him, hitting the backs of his knees with the broadest part of her back. Remon, lunging forward as though she were trying to catch the flying confection, slammed her shoulder into his chest at the same time, and they all went down in a tangle of bodies, leaving Kagome the only one standing.

" *Kagome, run!"* Tsubomi shouted as she tried to grapple the man's leg.

This, finally, seemed to shake the Lulim second-year from her stupor, and she took off running back toward the crowded festival grounds.

" *Get… OFF of me!"* Byakudan snarled, bodily heaving Remon off of his chest and kicking out his leg to roughly shake Tsubomi loose. Kizuna tried to get him in an arm-lock once he regained his feet, but he literally grabbed her by the face with his free hand and pushed her sprawling to the ground before dashing off in pursuit.

They hadn't been able to keep him down for long, but it had bought Kagome a lead. Tsubomi helped the other two stand, and they scrambled after him. " *Stop that man!"* Kizuna bellowed. " *Keep him away from her!"*

Soon they were right back in the midst of the festival. Kagome was ducking through crowds, obviously trying to use her smaller size to her advantage, while her father merely barreled his way through, and all too quickly, near the food stands, he caught up with her, clamping his hand around her upper arm. "Kagome-chan, stop this at once! You will *obey* me!"

This time, though, Kagome did not freeze at those words. " *Let me go!"* she screamed, her voice louder than Tsubomi had ever heard it. " *Let me go, let me go, LET ME GO!"*

"Kagome-chan, this is no time for a tantrum!" the man growled, shaking her roughly. "You will *obey* me!"

A crowd was quickly forming, and Tsubomi looked desperately for a teacher, a nun… hell, *any* adult who could stop this.

Then, as if in answer to her prayers, there was a rose-colored blur, and suddenly a woman was standing in the center of the rough circle of onlookers, a stick of takoyaki in one hand, and the other with a handful of Byakudan's shirt.

"She said to let her go," said Ren Fengxian in a soft voice.

"Who the hell are you?!" he spat.

"The stable hand." Fengxian replied, her face devoid of expression.

"Well, *stable hand*," he sneered, "I happen to be Kagome-chan's father, and I've come to take her home."

Fengxian looked down at Kagome. "Do you want to go with him?" she asked.

Kagome shook her head furiously, still trying to free herself from his grasp.

"She wants you to let her go," Fengxian said, returning her gaze to the red-faced father. "And so do I."

"Kagome-chan, you are my daughter, and you will come with me!"

" *NO!"* Kagome screamed again, finally squirming out of his grasp and ducking behind the Chinese woman. " *I'm not going home with you! I don't want you to touch me ever again! I don't want you to hurt me ever again!"*

There was a chorus of soft gasps, as well as the sounds of running feet as Hazuki and Kaname sprinted onto the scene, followed closely by Chikaru, then at a greater distance by Chiyo and what looked like most of the cast of the opera. The former two looked ready to kill (or at least maim) somebody, but they came up short at the scene before them.

Fengxian looked from Kagome to her father, then dropped her takoyaki so she could grab the man with both hands and pull his face to within centimeters of her own. Tsubomi was not at a good angle to see the look on Fengxian's face, but she got a good look at Byakudan as the color drained from his skin, and his eyes went wide while his mouth moved soundlessly.

"My sister," said the stable hand, her voice as soft as ever, "was about her age when a group of men raped and murdered her before my eyes." She pulled him in a hairsbreadth closer. "Do you want to know what I did to them? Do you want to know what I do to people who would hurt children?"

After this, Fengxian went on speaking - or at least, her lips were still moving - but her words were too quiet for Tsubomi to hear.

Byakudan, on the other hand, was reading her loud and clear.

"N-no," the man said in a tremulous whisper, his face contorting in horror to the point that his skin seemed to be trying to escape to the back of his skull. A dark stain appeared on the front of his slacks and started slowly working its way down one leg.

"Holy sh!t," Kaname whispered.

"Do you want to hear more?" Fengxian asked, almost conversationally.

His answer was a series of choked-out nonsense syllables as he went completely slack in her grasp. At first, Tsubomi wondered if he had fainted, but his eyes were still wide open and twitching spastically.

"Fenxian-san, you may let him go now," came an authoritative voice. The crowd parted not unlike the Red Sea as Sister Mizue arrived in the company of three men: two in uniform and one in a suit.

Fengxian relaxed her grip on Byakudan while the two uniformed men handcuffed his wrists together behind his back. He offered no resistance, and in fact did not seem to be able to focus on any of them.

"Byakudan-san," said the man in the suit, "I am Inspector Fukuyama of the prefectural police, and I am placing you under arrest based on the evidence gathered from your home this morning. You have the right to remain silent, and you have the right to an attorney at your trial."

The two uniformed officers led him away, though the man could barely put one foot in front of the other. Tsubomi looked for Kagome, and found that she was holding tightly to Fengxian, her face buried against the woman's chest. For her part, Fengxian had her strong arms wrapped protectively around Kagome, though she was looking somewhat mournfully at her dropped takoyaki.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone started applauding.

It began with just the one set of hands, but then another joined, and another, until almost everyone present was cheering. Chikaru approached the pair, giving Fengxian a thankful smile before crouching to ask Kagome something. The second year turned and nodded to her class president, but showed no signs of letting go of her protector.

"So what do you figure?" Tsubomi heard Kaname ask from close by. "Did she put the fear of God into him?"

"No, I think she put the fear of Ren into him," Hazuki said dryly. "That might actually be worse."

Tsubomi then found herself being hugged between Kizuna and Remon. "You did great, Tsubomi-chan," Kizuna whispered.

"Hey, so did you," Tsubomi replied, though she could not quite bring herself to smile.

"Thanks for being there," Remon nodded against her. "God, if you hadn't been…"

Two distinct handclaps rang out over the buzz of noise, causing the crowd to fall silent. "Your attention!" Sister Mizue called. "That will be enough gawking for one day. Please allow the police to do their work, and the rest of you can go about your business." She narrowed her eyes and swept her gaze over all assembled. "I do believe a great many of you have a show to put on, do you not?"

If nothing else, the arrest of Byakudan-san gave the cast of *Pirates* something to talk about backstage other than how nervous they were.

Even though she would not be on stage until the second half of the show, Hazuki was already in costume well before curtain. Given the amount of time it took to get her hair pinned back sufficiently to fit into the silly Keystone Cops hat, she felt better having as many of her preparations as possible over and done with now rather than at the wire. Along with that, it gave her a chance to relax in the much more spacious green room (rather than the overly packed chorus dressing room) and just enjoy the atmosphere as much as she could.

She had gleaned from a brief conversation between Fukuyama and Sister Mizue (not that she had intentionally stuck around long enough to hear it, of course) that police had raided the Byakudan home that morning and found enough incriminating evidence to arrest him, but he himself had not been there. Speculation was that he had gotten wind of the raid and fled, but had come to Astraea with the intention of taking Kagome away with him to… wherever he would have gone. Fukuyama and his officers had been on site in anticipation of this possibility, but were waiting for him to leave the campus grounds before they made the arrest.

Apparently Tsubomi, Kizuna and Remon had gotten to him first, however, leading to the chase that culminated with Ryofu's

intervention.

Hazuki closed her eyes and tried to suppress a shiver as she remembered the look on Ryofu's face as she stared the man down. The ancient general's expression had barely changed, but there was something in her eyes - something positively lethal - that made Hazuki very glad to *not* be the focus of that fury. Whatever words she might have said to Byakudan were probably secondary to the weight of that glare.

It concerned Hazuki that Ryofu had been asked to stay "for questioning" afterward, and she hoped that this would not be another strike against her already tenuous employment. Considering that the whispered conversations backstage were already hailing her as a hero, though, perhaps the administrators would be reluctant to punish Ryofu for being in the wrong place at the wrong time… or in this case, the absolute *right* place at the absolute *right* time.

The green room was beginning to fill up as more and more of the chorus members and principals alike got into costume, and several were taking their turns in the makeup chairs. One particular poofy-dressed ward of the Major-General detached herself from the group and practically floated to where Hazuki was sitting. "Oh, I *do* love a girl in uniform," Tamao mock-swooned as she sat down beside her.

"You just love me for the badge," Hazuki sighed dramatically. "That's why you end up dumping me for a pirate in the end."

"I am nothing more than a victim of circumstance and choreography," Tamao said, batting her eyelashes.

"Story of my life," Hazuki replied, not able to hold back a smile.

"Hazuki-chan, your makeup's not done," Tamao noted.

"We're getting ours done during a lull in the first half. I'd be clueless trying to do it myself: I can't even do *regular* makeup, much less *stage* makeup."

Tamao grinned evilly, then leaned in and said the next so only Hazuki could hear. "Then how will you ever manage to be a lipstick lesbian, Hazuki-chan?"

"Ehh, I'm okay being a futch," Hazuki shrugged.

This earned her a giggle from Tamao, who carefully leaned further in to rest on her shoulder, taking pains to keep the aforementioned makeup from smearing against the navy blue cloth of Hazuki's costume.

For a while, neither of them spoke, but then Tamao let out a soft sigh. "Do you think Kagome will be okay?"

"Well, she stood up to an abuser in plain sight of the world, and she's surrounded by people who are probably feeling well inclined to look out for her, now including a thousand-year-old Chinese warlord, so I think she'll be *safe* for now." Hazuki paused and frowned. "As for whether or not she'll be *okay*… that's harder to say. I hope so. I hope we can all be there for her."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," said Tamao. "I heard someone say that her mother has been missing for years, and with her father going to prison, will she even be able to keep going to St. Lulim? How can we be there for her if she has to leave?"

Hazuki's frown deepened. These schools were expensive, after all, and if Kagome were to become a child of The System, her chances for continuing here were probably slim. "Her tuition should be paid up for the full academic year, so… hopefully something will get worked out between now and February."

"I'll bet Chikaru is already trying to come up with something," Tamao smiled wanly.

"I wouldn't bet against it."

"Could I have everyone's attention please?" came a voice over the low murmur. "Could we get everyone in the green room before Places? I have a few announcements."

More and more of the cast began to self-herd into the green room, and Hazuki and Tamao soon found themselves in close quarters with literally dozens of their classmates in various states of costuming. Head and shoulders above the rest (thanks to the chair she was standing on), Sayuri waited for the shuffle to die down before she continued.

"Before we go on… I just wanted to take the time to say thank you," said the Lulim vice-president. "For what's it's worth, I checked through the archives, and this is the first time in *forty-six years* that the Astraea academies have even *attempted* something of this magnitude. You've worked very hard to get here, and you should all be proud of yourselves."

There was a light smattering of applause, and Sayuri actually gave them a small, crooked smile at this. "No, go ahead. You deserve it. It has been an honor to work with each and every one of you, and I deeply appreciate everything you've done in the service of this story, because *that's* what it's all about. *That's* what we're here to do. All this work is to serve the story, and to give it to our audience. For some of you, this may be your first and/or your last time on stage, so if I can offer you anything to take with you once the curtain closes… it's *that* thought. *Always* serve the story, in *all* that you do."

Tamao slipped her arm around Hazuki's waist and gave her a gentle squeeze, which Hazuki returned gratefully. They had a story of their own to serve once this was all over, and hopefully, thought Hazuki, they would still be able to make it a good one.

"Apart from that," Sayuri went on, "I can only remind you of what I've been saying all along. Diction, diction, diction. Those of you who have microphones, don't count on them to save you. Sing out, Louise! And last but not least… don't be afraid to smile! Remember, it's a comedy!"

Hazuki metaphorically bit her tongue at the mention of the microphones. On the one hand, she understood Sayuri's decision to keep it from the cast, but on the other… well, she was simply glad it had not been her decision to make.

"And… that's really all I have to say," Sayuri finished. "Break a leg, toi toi toi, and… let's send the audience home happy. Ayame, do you have anything?"

"I think you pretty much covered it, Sayuri-chan," came the secretary/AD's voice (though she had not made herself visible over the crowd). "I'll just echo what a treat this has been for us, to work with all of you, so thank you all for *everything* you've brought to this production. And with that… we are at Places and holding! Pirate King, Frederick, Samuel, Ruth, and pirate chorus, come to the stage! Those of you who have volunteered to sing with the chorus for the parts where you are *not* on stage, report to the stage left wings! The house is still filling, so we will be holding the curtain for now! Let's *do* this, ladies!"

Hazuki felt a pulse of something almost electrical race through her at Ayame's words: after weeks of preparation, it was actually happening.

"Shall we, then?" Tamao asked, her face a delightful mix of exhilarated and nervous.

"We shall," Hazuki nodded, taking her hand and following the crowd of actors out of the green room, down the long hall to the stage door, and out into the wings. The pirates continued out onto the dimly-lit stage, taking their places amidst the foam rocks of the set, while Hazuki, Tamao, Nagisa and several others clustered around the monitor showing the spotlighted (and currently unoccupied) conductor's podium. From the other side of the curtain, they could hear the low murmur of the audience as they waited for the show to begin.

Only at that moment, though, did it occur to Hazuki that Chikaru had not been there for the pre-show pep talk.

Before she could think too much about this, there came a soft wave of applause which slowly grew in intensity. The actors, both off and on stage, exchanged puzzled looks. "What are they clapping for?" Nagisa wondered aloud.

"Checking," came Ayame's voice from close by. She had changed clothes since Hazuki had seen her in the booth, having gone to a black turtleneck and equally black jeans. She tapped a button on the earpiece of her headset microphone. "Sakiya-chan, what's going on out there? The maestro didn't go out early, did she?"

Hazuki could not hear the tech's reply, but the resulting smile was plain enough on Ayame's face. "Roger that. Thank you."

"What happened?" Tamao asked.

"Kagome just came in," Ayame informed them. "She's got a whole posse with her, including Fengxian-san."

"Word travels fast around here," Hazuki sighed. While it was good to know that Ryofu had not been detained in any way, she couldn't help worrying about Kagome becoming the center of attention after all she had been through, never mind *because of* it.

Something to be sorted out soon, hopefully. As she had said to Tamao shortly before, perhaps the best they could do was simply be there for Kagome, and let the rest play out.

"Doors are closing," Ayame reported shortly thereafter. "We'll be dimming house lights and bringing in the maestro shortly. Hang tight, people."

Hazuki found one of Tamao's hands in her own, and gave it a squeeze. The brief *Souma* exchange, while as comforting as always, had something of an extra "flavor" to it tonight, and Hazuki felt the

other girl's excitement once again feeding her own. Ayame walked out onto the stage to let the various pirates know about the current status, then returned to the wings. "All clear?" she asked, though she was obviously speaking to her crew via the headset. "Just like we practiced it, then. House lights down."

There was an excited buzz from the audience as the theater lights began to dim, followed moments later by another round of applause as Ōhara-sensei stepped into the hall from one of the lower side doors and took the short staircase down into the orchestra pit. The orchestra rose in greeting, semi-obscuring the view on the backstage monitor, and their sensei shook the hand of the principal violinist before stepping up to her podium. There was the sound of the orchestra members taking their seats and opening their scores while the conductor waited patiently.

However, even as silence descended once more, Ōhara-sensei did not raise her baton, instead holding it with both hands, still smiling.

"And go," whispered Ayame.

The hush was broken by the sound of footsteps, followed moments later by renewed buzzing and a few gasps from the waiting audience. Almost before Hazuki could even guess what might be happening, though, another figure appeared on the screen, walking purposefully forward to stand beside the conductor's podium.

It was Chikaru.

Chikaru, dressed in an immaculate black tuxedo with tailcoat, pristine white shirt, and a vest and bow-tie in the same red shade as her ever-present hair bows, the entire ensemble expertly tailored to complement her figure. Hazuki would never have thought it possible for a tuxedo to be this… *feminine*, but Chikaru pulled it off stunningly. She heard another soft gasp from closer by, but she could not be sure if it had come from Tamao or herself.

The Lulim president bowed deeply to Ōhara-sensei, and the orchestra teacher stepped down from her podium.

And then, to a renewed chorus of gasps, she handed the baton to Chikaru, smiled, and walked away, leaving Chikaru to take her place in front of the orchestra.

Hazuki would be the first to admit that she did not know much about theater, much less opera or for that matter classical music in general, but even with her limited exposure to the genre, she was quite certain that Ōhara-sensei had just paid great honor to Chikaru, and she found herself simply gaping at the screen, too awestruck to even breathe.

"She really is something, isn't she?" Ayame said, quietly enough that only the girls closest to her could hear.

"When did this happen?" Tamao whispered.

"This morning," Ayame smiled. "Ōhara-sensei insisted that she wouldn't have it any other way."

Chikaru, meanwhile, was looking over the instrumentalists, making sure she had their attention. She then raised her baton, but before bringing it down to cue the percussion, she looked right into the camera and gave the girls in the wings a broad wink.

"God, I love her…" Tamao breathed. Hazuki could not find her voice sufficiently to respond, but she gripped the other girl's hand more tightly, sending a pulse of *Souma* to show her agreement.

After a brief roll from the timpani, the rest of the orchestra joined in with the bright, brash opening number. In the interest of time, they were skipping the overture, so it was only a few seconds later that Ayame called for the curtain to rise. Immediately, out on the stage, the pirates slipped into character, giving a series of lustful shouts as Momomi and Chihaya came in from the opposite wings to distribute prop mugs. Yaya was roughly passed between the chorus singers,

each girl taking a turn slapping her back, slamming their mugs together, messing with her long-plumed hat, or otherwise showing their piratical affection for the apprentice of their band.

Not even thirty seconds in, it was time to sing. Hazuki exchanged wild, unabashed smiles with Tamao and Nagisa both as they joined in.

Pour, o pour the pirate sherry! Fill, o fill the pirate glass!

And to make us more than merry, let the pirate bumper pass!

Next: Curtain

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Next chapter will be the finale of Book II, followed by another flash-forward epilogue. Thank you all for coming along for the ride. (The long, long ride…)

Also, I think there may be some kind of problem with PMs? I'm not sure any of my review replies are getting through. (Dragon, you expressed concern that I had not gotten back to you, but I promise I tried - the PMs are even still showing up in my outbox.)

Meanwhile, though, you can still find us over at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook, provided that Zuck hasn't done anything stupid yet. (Let me check my watch…)

Toi toi toi!

Curtain

Is there no mastermind of modern day

Who can blueprint a plan to make love stay

Sturdy and weatherproof, ushering in a new revolution

At the drawing board the hopeful ones still try

How can we help it when we're fighting for the love of our lives

-Indigo Girls

Part 25: Curtain

St. Lulim School for Girls

in association with

St. Spica Girls' Institute and **St. Miator Girls' Academy**

presents

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Major-General Stanley - **Mizushima Noriko**

The Pirate King - **Kenjō Kaname**

Samuel (his lieutenant) - **Kiyashiki Momomi**

Frederic (the pirate apprentice) - **Nanto Yaya**

Sergeant of Police - **Ōtori Amane**

Mabel - **Konohana Hikari**

Edith - **Aoi Nagisa**

Kate - **Suzumi Tamao**

Isabel - **Katsuragi Misao**

Ruth (a Pirate Maid of all Work) - **Takemura Chihaya**

.

Directed by

Umekouji Ayame and **Kaganoi Sayuri**

Music Director

Kaganoi Sayuri

Adapted and Produced by

Minamoto Chikaru

.

ACT I: The pirates are discovered celebrating on a rocky beach in Cornwall, toasting their apprentice FREDERIC, who is now twenty-one years old and out of his indentures ("Pour, O Pour The Pirate Sherry"). To their dismay, FREDERIC tells the merry band that with the end of his indentures, he will be leaving them forever, as he has learned from his nursery maid RUTH that he was apprenticed to the PIRATE KING in error. She was asked to apprentice him to a ship's pilot, but due to her failing hearing, she instead apprenticed him to a

pirate, then stayed on as a "piratical maid of all work" once she realized her blunder ("When Frederic Was A Little Lad").

At the end of her song, Chihaya knelt before Yaya, sobbing. "Oh, pardon, Frederic, pardon!"

Yaya smiled down at her and helped her back to her feet. "Rise, sweet one. I have long pardoned you."

"The two words were so similar!" Chihaya said miserably.

"They were," Yaya nodded in agreement. "They still are, though years have rolled over their heads. But this afternoon, my obligation ceases!" She spread her arms wide, as though to take in the entire band. "Individually, I love you all with affection unspeakable!"

Here, Yaya turned to face Kaname, stepped up very close to her, and spoke the next line while meeting her eyes directly. "But collectively, I look at you with a disgust that amount to utter detestation."

Kaname smiled wickedly, knowing full well that this was her kohai's favorite line in the show.

FREDERIC tells the pirates that when he returns to civilization, he will have no choice but to follow his sense of duty and devote himself to hunting them down, but before he leaves he begs the pirates to give up their ways and join him in respectability. After all, they are very bad at piracy, having too much honor to attack anyone weaker than themselves, and getting thrashed when they attack stronger parties. They are also well-known for never hurting an orphan, since they are all orphans themselves, and thus every ship they capture claims to be manned entirely by orphans. The pirates, though seeing his point, decide that piracy is still more honest than respectability, and the PIRATE KING sings of the joys of his trade ("Oh, Better Far To Live And Die").

The pirates depart, leaving FREDERIC and RUTH alone. RUTH tries to convince him that in spite of her forty-seven years, she is still a beautiful woman, and wishes to remain at his side. However, the arrival of the wards of the Major-General reveals to FREDERIC that RUTH is in fact plain and old, and he sends her away ("Oh, False One, You Have Deceived Me" - CUT FOR TIME).

The ladies enter, led in song by EDITH and KATE ("Climbing Over Rocky Mountain"), and survey the now-deserted beach as FREDERIC hides, not wishing to alarm them with his pirate garb.

Tamao looked out over the audience, bouncing on her toes in excitement. "What a picturesque spot! I wonder where we are?"

"And I wonder were Father is?" added Nagisa, stepping up beside her to mimic looking at the scenery. "We have left him ever so far behind!"

"Oh, he will be here presently," said Misao as she spread a blanket on the "beach" behind them. "Remember, poor Father is not as young as we are, and we came over a rather difficult country."

"But how thoroughly delightful it is to be so entirely alone," Tamao beamed, looking side to side as the other girls came to join her upstage. "Why, in all probability we are the first human beings who ever set foot on this enchanting spot."

"Except the mermaids," Misao sighed dreamily. "It's the very place for mermaids!"

"Who are only human beings down to the waist," Tamao reminded her.

"And who can't be said strictly to set *foot* anywhere," Nagisa giggled, and the other girls tittered along with her observation. "Tails they may, but feet they cannot!"

Tamao sighed happily, then a troubled look came to her face. "But what shall we do until Father and the servants arrive with the luncheon?"

"We are quite alone," Nagisa said, her voice taking on a conspiratorial tone, "and the sea is as smooth as glass. Suppose we take off…"

The ladies gasped at her sheer audacity.

"… our shoes and socks…"

Another, louder gasp at her scandalous suggestion.

"… and paddle!" Nagisa exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, the very thing!" the ladies squealed in unison, each reaching to remove a shoe.

At this point, as much as Hazuki wanted to stay and continue to watch Tamao from the wings, she knew that she had to go and get her makeup done soon, so she quietly exited the main stage door once the orchestra came in to herald Yaya's re-entrance.

Stop, ladies, pray! (A man!)

I had intended not to intrude myself upon your notice

In this effective but alarming costume

But under these peculiar circumstances

It is my bounded duty to inform you

That your proceedings will not be unwitnessed!

Once Hazuki was back in the green room, one of the makeup artists (another Lulim senior whom she had seen on occasion at t'ai chi

practice) waved her to an unoccupied chair and proceeded to apply foundation. She could still hear the show via the single speaker set up over the door, and she listened as Yaya continued into the next song, in which Frederic begged any of the ladies, even the homeliest and plainest of them, to take pity on him and offer her heart to a man freshly out of his indentures.

Several of the pirates were here as well, waiting to make their next entrance, and Hazuki soon noticed that Kaname had pulled up another chair nearby, sitting astride it with her arms folded on the backrest. "That actually went pretty well."

"You sounded good," Hazuki replied, trying not to move her face as the crew member continued with her work.

"Ehh, I *looked* better than I *sounded*," Kaname snorted. "But then again, *I'm* not the one people came to see. That would be…"

She stretched out the last words to line up with the entrance of Hikari, who interrupted the musical conversation between Frederic and the ladies to offer herself as a match for the former pirate, singing what Sayuri had described as one of the best-known melodies of the work.

Poor wand'ring one!

Though thou hast surely strayed

Take heart of grace

Thy steps retrace

Poor wand'ring one!

"She's got good pipes, doesn't she?" Kaname smiled.

"That she does," Hazuki agreed.

The ladies, seeing that FREDERIC and MABEL have quickly become smitten with one another, try to ignore them and chatter about the weather while the two proclaim their love in a duet ("How Beautifully Blue The Sky" - CUT FOR TIME). Suddenly, FREDERIC remembers that the pirates will be returning soon, and tries to warn the ladies, but he is too late: the pirates arrive, each seizing a girl to drag off and marry ("Stay, We Must Not Lose Our Senses"). MABEL responds by warning the pirates that she and her sisters are wards in Chancery, and that their father is a Major-General. The pirates are skeptical, but presently MAJOR-GENERAL STANLEY arrives to introduce himself ("I Am The Very Model Of A Modern Major-General").

From her place in the pit, Chikaru was trying desperately to *not* think about how well this was going.

Her conversation with Ōhara-sensei and promotion to Conductor this morning had been a genuine surprise, to be sure, but considering that she had conducted all of the orchestra rehearsals up through tech week, the instrumentalists were by now quite used to her, and she was able to keep them together with no difficulty.

Meanwhile, though, while she was in no position to see much of the staging, she was growing increasingly shocked (but pleasantly so!) at how well the vocalists were performing. Yaya and Hikari (particularly the latter) were positively soaring through their solos, Chihaya and Kaname were belting it out in convincing character voices, and Nagisa and Tamao, while sometimes doubling up on what normally would have been solo lines for each of them, were complementing one another beautifully, as though they had been singing together for years. On top of this, the chorus vocals were tight and crisp, even with the occasional support of additional singers offstage: Sayuri's hard work with them was paying off under the lights.

Obviously, she could not tell what the balance between the orchestra and the un-amplified vocalists might have been from within the

house, but considering that she, with an orchestra literally right in front of her, was hearing the singers quite clearly, she was hoping for the best.

All of that in mind, Chikaru knew that there were still plenty of chances for things to go pear-shaped, and they were coming up on the next of said chances with the arrival of Noriko as the Major-General, soon to be singing the song that everyone who knew anything about the work had come to hear.

After making her dramatic entrance before the pirates could drag off her many daughters, Noriko strode to front and center, looking every bit like a late-Nineteenth-century Great White Hunter on a safari, pith helmet and all. She made brief eye contact with Chikaru, showing that she was ready. Chikaru gave a tiny nod in reply, then turned back to the orchestra, and with no more than an upbeat, brought them in. Even from where she was, she could hear a buzz of recognition from the audience before Noriko began singing the first verse.

I am the very model of a modern Major-General

I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral

I know the kings of England and I quote the fights historical

From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical!

I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical

I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical

About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot of news…

Here, as was traditional (it was even written into the score), she made a business of appearing stuck for a rhyme, and she glanced over toward the chorus, where Nagisa and Tamao held up their fingers to form a triangle. Noriko called out: "Ah, yes, thank you!"

while Chikaru held the orchestra ready to come back in with Noriko's subsequent line, which was then echoed by the chorus.

… With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse!

(With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse)

(With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse)

(With many cheerful facts about the square of the hy-pot-e-pot-e-nuse!)

I'm very good at integral and differential calculus

I know the scientific names of beings animalculus

In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral

I am the very model of a modern Major-General!

(In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral)

(He is the very model of a modern Major-General!)

They plowed through the second verse, then slowed it down for the third, as the Major-General regaled her fellow actors (and the audience, of course) with the many varied subjects in which she was a certified expert, before coming in at the end with the final punch line.

For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventury

Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century

But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral

I am the very model of a modern Major-General!

(But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral)

(He is the very model of a modern Major-General!)

A brief instrumental outtro followed, after which the crowd simply went wild. From her vantage, Chikaru could not be sure whether or not it was a standing ovation, but it sure as anything *sounded* like one.

Then, to her shock, a voice near the front of the hall called out: " *Encore!"*

Several other voices took up the shout, and it quickly became a chant. " *Encore! Encore! Encore!"*

Chikaru looked up at the stage to see Noriko staring down at her, her eyes filled with challenge. It occurred to Chikaru that Noriko might very well have asked some of her classmates to start that chant, but now a significant part of the audience had taken it up.

Having studied the history of this work, Chikaru was well aware that in Gilbert's time, they would simply repeat the third verse as an encore, and only later productions took liberties with a topical fourth verse. She also knew that if she brought in the orchestra again, Noriko was *not* going to do things the sensible Gilbert-ian way.

By now, probably well over half the audience was chanting and clapping in rhythm for that encore.

Chikaru sighed in defeat, hoping that she still had enough good credit with the administrators that she could take the heat for what was to follow. She leaned in toward the orchestra and held up three fingers with her free hand. "Third verse again, ladies," she said over the din.

As soon as the first notes struck, the crowd noise died down, and Noriko continued her solo.

When I have seen three rival schools, the stories I could thus relate

When I've met many lesbians, at least until they graduate

When I have heard such rumors of those things that we dare not confess

But no one tells the nuns because we all know that it's just Type-S

When I've sought out pure maidens, but I'm not sure that we've got any

When I know more of lilies than a student versed in botany

To sum up, when you hear the tales of things hush-hush and what-you-will

Here, Noriko paused again - not to appear stuck for a rhyme, but to smirk devilishly at the audience before she continued:

You'd say this Major-General must live upon Astraea Hill!

The chorus, bless them, did their best to repeat these lines, and actually acquitted themselves fairly well, but in the end they probably went unheard over the uproarious laughter from the crowd.

(You'd say this Major-General must live upon Astraea Hill!)

(You'd say this Major-General must live upon Astraea Hill!)

(You'd say this Major-General must live upon A-strae-a-strae-a Hill!)

Here, Noriko held out both hands to the audience in an exaggerated gesture of apology, and gave a set of final lines that were, to Chikaru's profound relief, much tamer than the ones she had originally submitted. Perhaps, Chikaru considered, the girl still had a tiny sense of decency after all.

Now if my jokes have caused offense, I'll smile and say with surety

That every woman there is still a bastion of purity

But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral

I am the very model of a modern Major-General!

(But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral)

(He is the very model of a modern Major-General!)

This time, Chikaru was quite sure that the ovation was standing in nature. She looked up at Noriko and shook her head as the actress held her final pose with a distinct air of smugness, then turned the page on her score and prepared to bring in the orchestra for the Act I finale.

The MAJOR-GENERAL demands to know what is going on, and learns that the men who intend to carry off his wards and marry them are in fact the famous Pirates of Penzance. Aware of their reputation, the MAJOR-GENERAL has an idea, and tells the pirates (falsely) that he is an orphan. The pirates are exasperated, but as they hear his tale of misery, they are moved to tears ("Oh, Men Of Dark And Dismal Fate"). The PIRATE KING allows them to go free, per their rules, and FREDERIC and MABEL are overjoyed at the prospect of marrying at once. RUTH appears, begging FREDERIC to reconsider, but again he casts her away. END ACT I.

Normally, at this point there would have been an intermission between acts, but the directorial staff had made the decision well before the first rehearsal that they would, by cutting several numbers and scenes, condense the work to a single long act rather than two. Instead of closing the curtain, then, they ended what should have been the Act I finale with a blackout, after which the orchestra played an *entre-acte* while the actors high-tailed it offstage and the crew set about, in nearly pitch blackness, transforming the scene from a beach in Cornwall to the family cemetery of the Major-General's estate. Rocks were replaced with gravestones and monuments, and a new backdrop was lowered from overhead to replace the ocean

with a ruined moonlit chapel. The ladies and the Major-General, with the assistance of a small horde of costume crew, were ushered into the green room for a quick change into modest, period-appropriate bedclothes (as there was neither time nor space to do so in the dressing room), then hustled back out on stage to take their places in time for the next scene to begin.

As soon as the lights came up, Amane, Hazuki, and the rest of the chorus of police officers made their way into the wings to prepare for their entrance. In a full production there would have been a song here, in which Mabel and the other ladies would sing their distress at the melancholy which had overcome their father, but that was one of the numbers to have been cut, and instead the scene began with dialogue. Hazuki realized then and there that they were on the verge of making their entrance at last, and while she was definitely nervous, it actually felt more thrilling than anything else.

Because they were entering in (reverse) height order behind Amane, Hazuki was directly behind the Étoile as they watched from offstage. The Major-General bemoaned the guilt that had consumed him since telling the abominable falsehood which had saved them from the pirates. Frederic assured him that he did the right thing, and vowed that he, along with his police escort, would soon eradicate the pirate menace, so that he and Mabel could marry at last.

Hazuki turned her attention to Amane, and was not surprised to see that she looked as though she might throw up at any moment. "How do you feel, Étoile-sama?" she asked, though she could guess the answer.

"I don't think I've ever been this scared in my life," Amane admitted.

"I get it," Hazuki nodded, but then she paused for a moment and leaned in a little closer. "You know… I saw you jump onto the back of a dragon once."

"That was pure instinct."

"Right," Hazuki chuckled. "Okay… so you're scared out of your mind and finding yourself barely able to hold it together?"

"Something like that, yes."

"So… just like the character you're playing, don't you reckon?"

Amane looked back at her with a frown, then nodded slowly. "I suppose you're right."

"There, you see?" Hazuki smiled. "You're just a method actor."

"Lovely," Amane sighed as she turned back toward the stage, but Hazuki thought she saw the ghost of a smile.

Wishing she could do more for her, Hazuki laid her free hand (the one that was not holding her billy club) flat against the Étoile's back. She knew that she could not send *Souma* to the other girl, but nonetheless, she tried to clear her own head and use this contact to channel any energy she could manage. "You've got this, Étoile-sama," she whispered.

Amane took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, and for those few seconds, Hazuki indeed felt as though something were passing between them. At that moment, the orchestra came in, and Noriko and Yaya sang the lines that heralded their entrance.

Then, Frederic, let your escort lion-hearted

Be summoned to receive a General's blessing

'Ere they depart upon their dread adventure

Dear sir, they come!

In time with the martial theme now played by the orchestra, the police marched on from stage left in a single-file line, then turned to face the audience while Amane paced back and forth in front of them. And then, while the police sang in response, Amane delivered

the first verse in a loud, commanding, but most importantly *spoken* voice.

When the foeman bares his steel (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra!)

We uncomfortable feel (ta-ran ta-ra!)

And we find the wisest thing (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra!)

Is to slap our chests and sing (ta-ran ta-ra!)

This, as Hazuki and the rest of the chorus had learned just before going on stage, was the way they had come up with to get past the Étoile's paralyzing mental block about singing. While her lines were delivered in rhythm, they were presented in a *character* voice rather than a *singing* voice. The chorus went on singing as usual, and on the lines where she felt more confident, Amane would even join them musically.

Based on the looks of sheer delight on the audience's faces, it was working.

For when threatened with emeutes (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra!)

And your heart is in your boots (ta-ran ta-ra!)

There is nothing brings it 'round like the trumpet's martial sound

Like the trumpet's martial sound!

Here, as the chorus continued to sing their *ta-ran ta-ras*, they began to march in formation, weaving in and out between one another, spinning their clubs and doubling back on their steps in perfect symmetry. It had occurred to Hazuki early in the process that the chorus of police had been chosen for their abilities to move and dance far more than their singing, and Ayame had taken full advantage of that in working them through these militaristic drills. Amane was spared from most of the choreography as she continued to strut back and forth and "supervise" their movements, and she

was soon met at center stage by Hikari, who sang the next… *inspirational* verse to her (offstage) love.

Go, ye heroes, go to glory

Though you die in combat gory

Ye shall live in song and story

Go to immortality!

Go to death, and go to slaughter!

Die, and every Cornish daughter

With her tears your grave shall water

Go, ye heroes, go and die!

The chorus of ladies echoed her final line, and the police cast nervous looks at one another before resuming their marching routine. Amane continued her patter-speak, and to Hazuki's ears, she sounded remarkably… *English* . She was not sure what it would have sounded like if a member of Monty Python were to attempt to speak Japanese, but she fancied it would be something like this.

Though to us it's evident (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra!)

These attentions are well-meant (ta-ran ta-ra!)

Such attentions don't appear (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra!)

Calculated men to cheer (ta-ran ta-ra!)

Who are going to meet their fate

In a highly nervous state (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran-ta-ra!)

Still to us it's evident

These attentions are well meant (ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran ta-ra, ta-ran-ta-ra!)

Now, Nagisa and Tamao stepped up to flank the hapless Amane, singing another allegedly inspirational verse before the remaining ladies of the chorus joined in to drive the point home.

Go and do your best endeavour

And before all links we sever

We shall say farewell forever

Go to glory and the grave!

Go to glory and the grave!

For your foes are fierce and ruthless

Harsh, unmerciful and truthless

Young and tender, old and toothless

All in vain their mercy crave!

The police visibly shrank upon themselves, while Amane made an exaggerated attempt to sneak away, only to be dragged back on by Hikari. Pausing only to straighten herself up, she continued her pseudo-singing in a shaky voice that actually sounded more affected than real.

We observe too great a stress on the risks that on us press

And of reference a lack to our chance of coming back

Still, perhaps it would be wise not to carp or criticise

For it's very evident these attentions are well meant

(Yes, it's very evident these attentions are well meant)

(Evident, yes, well meant, evident, ah yes, well meant!)

Now they came to Hazuki's favorite part of the song, where the police sang Amane's first verse alongside the ladies singing Hikari's. Each of the policemen were flanked by one of the daughters (to Hazuki's delight, Ayame had staged it so that Hazuki was beside Tamao while Amane was partnered with Hikari), and they marched together in unison, albeit with the ladies looking far more positive about the prospects of the police's messy death than the police themselves.

It was then, for just a few lines, that Hazuki found herself in a state where she was not concentrating on her next words, or on her next movements: she was simply *doing* them, swept along for the ride alongside everyone else. She vividly remembered Sayuri's words about serving the story, and she realized that *that very story* was happening all around her; in that moment, she felt truly privileged to be part of its telling. This opera was well over a century old, written by two men who were long gone, but now the joy *and* the responsibility of it belonged to *her*, along with everyone else on that stage.

She wondered briefly if Amane felt it as well, and hoped that this would carry her through to the end.

At length, though, an exasperated Noriko began trying to shoo them off the stage to get on with their mission.

Away, away! (Yes, yes, we go!)

These pirates slay! (ta-ran ta-ra!)

Then do not stay! (ta-ran ta-ra!)

Then why this delay? (All right, we go!)

After a few more prodding lines from Noriko (the last of them shouted for effect), the police reluctantly made their exit downstage left, while the ladies and the Major-General followed, leaving Yaya alone, where she would soon be joined by Kaname and Chihaya for the introduction of a dreaded Second Act Plot Twist.

All of this was lost on Hazuki, however, who found herself amidst a press of bodies in the wings, as everyone tried to crowd around the elder Étoile and offer their congratulations. Ayame quickly shepherded them offstage, and the cluster of actors spilled down the hall and into the green room, where (once all the doors were closed) the cast cheered their Sergeant of Police. Directly in the center of the crowd was Hikari, holding tightly to her love and looking far happier than anyone else at Amane's success.

Do to their respective height, it was easy enough for Hazuki to catch Amane's eye, and she grinned and flashed the Étoile a thumbs-up. Amane smiled back wearily, but it was the most genuine smile anyone had seen from her in weeks.

The PIRATE KING and RUTH appear, wishing to speak with FREDERIC, and after some convincing, he agrees. With much laughter, they tell him of their discovery that FREDERIC was in fact born in leap year, on February twenty-ninth, creating the humorous paradox that while he has lived twenty-one years, he has only had five actual birthdays ("When You Had Left Our Pirate Fold"). FREDERIC is amused at the idea that he is only a little boy of five, until the PIRATE KING and RUTH remind him that he was apprenticed to them not until his twenty-first year, but his twenty-first birthday, which will not be reached until the year 1940. FREDERIC begs them not to hold him to the letter of the agreement, but they remind him of his sense of duty, which he cannot ignore. He agrees to return with them, and as their apprentice once more, he feels obligated to reveal that MAJOR-GENERAL STANLEY lied about being an orphan. Enraged, the PIRATE KING vows to gather the

band and attack that very night ("Away, Away, My Heart's On Fire" - CUT FOR TIME).

As RUTH and the PIRATE KING depart, MABEL returns to tell FREDERIC that all is prepared for the police's attack on the pirates. FREDERIC tells her his unfortunate situation, and she begs him to reconsider ("Stay, Frederic, Stay!"). FREDERIC swears to come back for her at the end of his indentures, and MABEL sees him off tearfully, before steeling herself and calling to the police, intending to send them on their mission even without FREDERIC ("No, I Am Brave").

The police enter, and MABEL informs them that they will be fighting the pirates without FREDERIC, whom she insists she loves more than ever in his courageous sacrifice to his sense of duty. The police, perplexed, ponder their role and conclude that a policeman's lot is not a happy one ("When A Felon's Not Engaged In His Employment").

The pirates arrive, singing from offstage ("A Rollicking Band Of Pirates, We"), and the police bravely hide as the pirates emerge onto the stage ("With Cat-Like Tread"). The finale begins as FREDERIC notices someone approaching, and the pirates also hide themselves variously as MAJOR-GENERAL STANLEY enters, still expressing his melancholy and guilt for his terrible lie ("Sighing Softly To The River"). MABEL and her sisters arrive, having noticed their father awake in the middle of the night, and the pirates leap out of their hiding places to seize him. MABEL calls for help, and the police emerge, only to be quickly disarmed by the pirates in the space of about two measures of music. The pirates mock their fallen foes, but the SERGEANT OF POLICE has other ideas…)

During the rehearsal process, Kaname had suggested that she and Hazuki have a little bit of a private duel during the fight scene between the pirates and police, but Ayame had put the kibosh on that pretty quickly, reminding her that this was a comedy and not a martial-arts movie. The eventual compromise was that Hazuki would

be the one to attack (and be disarmed by) the Pirate King, something which Kaname appeared to enjoy far more than even her character ought to have.

Now, with the police on their knees, the pirates triumphant, the Major-General at gunpoint, and the ladies clinging to one another in fear, Amane got back to her feet, and to the surprise of everyone on the stage, sung her next lines in a steady, flawless tone.

To gain a brief advantage you've contrived

But your proud triumph will not be long-lived

Kaname swaggered up to the uniformed girl, obviously unimpressed.

Don't say you're orphans, for we know that game

Amane shook her head, and turned to the audience, raising her hand in salute even as Kaname lowered her prop pistol at the Étoile.

On your allegiance we've a stronger claim

We charge you yield

We charge you yield - in Queen Victoria's name!

The pirates gasped with shock, even as the ladies sighed with relief at this turn of events. Kaname, however, merely lowered her gun and gave Amane a thoroughly befuddled look.

You do?

Joining their voices with the Sergeant, the police also rose to their feet, saluting the unseen Queen.

We do!

We charge you yield - in Queen Victoria's name!

Defeated by their own patriotism, the pirates sank to their knees, laying their various weapons to the ground, and Kaname conceded the victory.

We yield at once with humbled mien

Because, with all our faults, we love our queen

(Yes, yes, with all their faults, they love their queen)

(Yes, yes, with all their faults, they love their queen!)

Now free, Noriko quickly stepped forward to order the pirates' arrest.

Away with them, and place them at the bar!

Even as the police moved to grab the pirates, however, Chihaya came forward to deliver what Sayuri had described as the traditional Gilbert and Sullivan Last-Second Plot Twist (but which Hazuki preferred to think of as an ass-pull).

One moment! Let me tell you who they are!

They are no members of the common throng

They are all noblemen who have gone wrong!

Suddenly delighted at the prospect of marrying a band of secret noblemen rather than a bunch of dirty pirates, the ladies repeated the last line and scampered to each take a pirate by the arm, while Hikari happily dashed to Yaya's side. Noriko, obviously overwhelmed by this turn of good fortune, shook hands with Kaname and delivered them into the grand finale.

No Englishman unmoved this statement hears

Because, with all our faults, we love our house of peers!

I pray you pardon me, ex-Pirate King

Peers will be peers, and youth will have its fling

Resume your ranks and legislative duties

And take my daughters, all of whom are beauties!

Normally, the final number, a reprise of Poor Wandering One, would begin with Mabel singing alone, but early on Hikari had asked to share this last bit of spotlight with Nagisa and Tamao, so the three stage-sisters stepped forward to sing together as for the first and only time in the production, the full cast sang behind them.

Poor wand'ring ones!

Though ye have surely strayed

Take heart of grace

Your steps retrace

Poor wand'ring ones!

Poor wand'ring ones

If such poor love as ours

Can help you find

True peace of mind

Why, take it, it is yours!

Just like that, after a final dancing playoff while the curtain closed, it was over, but they had one last duty to perform for the audience.

As the principals dashed off stage, the chorus of pirates, ladies and police lined up to face the unseen audience. The curtain then opened once more, and they took a group bow (led by Hazuki).

Then, the principals came on for their own bows. First came Misao, Nagisa and Tamao, then Momomi and Chihaya, followed soon after by Amane, then Kaname. Noriko was next, then Yaya, and finally Hikari, by which time the audience members had almost all risen to their feet, still applauding and cheering.

It was during these sequential bows that Hazuki noticed a flash of gold in the third row, and her eyes widened as she recognized a familiar figure in a Miator uniform. Aaya noticed her attention, and gave her a knowing wink.

The principals formed a second line in front of the chorus, and Hikari led them in a full-cast bow, after which she extended a hand toward the pit to acknowledge Chikaru and the orchestra (to yet another surge in cheering), followed by one final cast bow as the orchestra played out the last reprise of the finale, the curtain re-closed, and the house lights came up.

Then it was truly over, though at that moment Hazuki was having difficulty processing anything at all, much less the finality of it. When looking back on it later, all she would remember would be individual images out of the chaos of hugs and tears and cries of equal parts triumph and relief. She saw Yaya and Hikari share a long, happy embrace as Amane stood close by, but after they broke it was Yaya who threw herself at Amane first and hugged the older Étoile with all her strength.

She saw Kaname going out of her way to shake hands with each and every one of the pirates, offering what could only be congratulations. When she got to Yaya and the two Étoile, she gave them a small bow, then extended her hand to Yaya, saying something that Hazuki could not hear over the din. There was a brief moment of uncertainty, but then Yaya nodded, took the proffered hand, and gave it a strong shake. Hikari, for her part, simply beamed.

She saw Ayame going through the motions of trying to get people to leave the stage so the crew could clean up, but it was obvious that

she was too deliriously happy to make a fuss about it. She saw Misao say something to Momomi off to one side, after which the Spica president rolled her eyes and nodded, but she was smiling as well.

But soon all of that became secondary as Chikaru came in from the wings, looking like she'd dashed all the way from the orchestra pit. Her eyes sought out Hazuki and Tamao, and she crossed the crowded stage toward them, stopping short a couple meters away with a look of hesitation crossing her face.

Tamao, however, did not hesitate for a moment, and flung herself into the other girl's arms, while Chikaru closed her eyes and buried her face in Tamao's shoulder. It was at this point that Hazuki could no longer simply watch, and she added herself to the hug, coming around Chikaru from behind and sandwiching her between them. Chikaru slid her hand around the back of Tamao's neck, and for the first time in far too long, Hazuki felt three presences of *Souma* washing over her, through her, and within her.

" *Tadaima,"* Chikaru whispered.

" *Okaeri nasai,"* Tamao replied, her voice almost a sob.

For a long while, Hazuki simply basked in the moment, but then she heard soft applause from very close by. The three broke slightly from their embrace to see that a great many members of the cast had made a small circle around them, and were cheering and smiling at their reunion.

Hazuki noticed that Kaname looked as though she were on the verge of a wisecrack, but Nagisa, of all people, beat her to it.

"Aww, don't you just *love* happy endings?"

As was tradition, the cultural festival wrapped up with a bonfire under the stars.

Kaname spent the first part of it wandering through the crowds, occasionally autographing the programs of starry-eyed first-years and even posing for a photograph here and there. No matter where she looked, though, she could not find Momomi anywhere.

She did, however, eventually bump into Hazuki. Her frequent sparring partner was standing near the edge of the clearing, arms crossed, but the expression on her face was a sort of exhausted contentment.

"Evening," Kaname nodded to her.

"Mmm," Hazuki replied. "Still in your costume, I see."

"Yeah, well, it's good to be the king," Kaname smirked. "And I see you didn't waste any time getting out of yours."

"Well, the Spica uniform and I have never been on the best of terms, but it's still more comfortable than that wool coat I was in."

"Fair enough. Say, I don't suppose you've seen Momomi anywhere?"

Hazuki looked over at her and frowned. "Yeah, I have. I guess she never found you, then?"

"Found me?"

"I saw her backstage after I got changed," Hazuki explained. "She asked me to pass on a message to you in case she couldn't find you."

"She did?" Kaname asked, a bit surprised that Momomi would use Hazuki as a messenger. "What was it?"

"She said to tell you that she had to leave right after the show. She said it was some kind of a family thing, but she wasn't any more specific than that."

"Oh," Kaname said, feeling an uncomfortable disappointment welling up within. "That's… weird. I knew she had a family thing tomorrow morning, but she never said anything about having to leave tonight."

"It sounded like it was something that just came up," said Hazuki. "Sorry."

"Ehh, not your fault," Kaname shrugged, then changed the subject before she could let that cold feeling get any more purchase. "So hey, I'm a little surprised to see you by yourself after that big dramatic clinch after the curtain. Where are your better thirds?"

Hazuki chuckled, then pointed off toward a crowded wooden bench closer to the fire, where a still-tuxedoed Chikaru was sitting in the center of a cluster of girls. "Chikaru's taking some time with Kagome right now. I'm not about to begrudge her that, especially after everything that happened today."

"True, true," Kaname nodded. Hopefully she herself would soon have a chance to talk to the Lulim third-year as well. For that matter, she wanted to thank Tsubomi and Ryofu for being there when she could not.

"And Tamao," Hazuki continued, "is over there, having some Nagisa time, along with someone else you might recognize."

Kaname followed Hazuki's gaze, and there indeed were Tamao and Nagisa, having an animated conversation with a familiar silver-haired girl. "Wait, when the hell did Shizuma get here?"

"Apparently about five minutes before curtain," Hazuki smiled. "And then she nearly didn't get in because she wasn't technically a student or family, and the first-year in the ticket booth didn't recognize her."

"Oh, I would have *loved* to see that," Kaname laughed.

"Anyway," Hazuki went on, an unreadable smile coming to her face, "I'm actually feeling weirdly antisocial right now, so I figured I'd just watch from back here for a while. Chikaru says she wants to take me and Tamao somewhere special a little bit later, though."

"Somewhere special," Kaname repeated, grinning evilly. "Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Hazuki arched an eyebrow at her. "That's probably not all *that* restrictive, is it?"

"Nope," Kaname chuckled. She raised one fist, and Hazuki tapped it with her own. "Back to our regular sparring schedule soon?"

"Looking forward to it," Hazuki nodded.

"I'll let you get back to being antisocial, then," Kaname bowed, turning it into a mock-flourish befitting her costume. " *Oyasuminasai."*

" *Oyasumi."*

With no particular destination in mind now, Kaname wandered off. She briefly considered saying hello to Shizuma, but she wasn't really in the mood for that level of schmooze. Perhaps Hazuki's antisocial-ness had rubbed off on her. Probably best at this point to just head back to the dorm and call it a night.

That was what she *should* have done, anyway. Instead, contrary to all common sense, she took a slightly different route back through the woods, until she came to an achingly familiar spot. It had changed a bit in the last five years (seeing as trees have this habit of continuing to grow, she reasoned), but this was definitely it. This was the place she had found with Momomi during the bonfire of their first-year festival.

The place where they had first kissed.

She ducked under the low-hanging branches of the big cedar, into the hollow, sheltered space beneath them, and placed her hand against the sturdy trunk. While she was not normally one to be overly sentimental, she had truly wanted to bring Momomi back here after their last festival together, to the place where it all began…

The cold feeling from earlier was returning, so she shook her head and walked away quickly, back toward Strawberry Hall.

When she got back to her room, she was surprised to find a manila A4 envelope on the floor just inside. Apparently someone had come by and slid it under the door. She picked it up and studied it briefly, but found it completely blank, addressed to no one.

She paused to hang up her pirate hat, then sat down at her desk and opened the (unsealed) packet, removing a few sheets of paper.

The top one was a printout from a website, and to her annoyance, it was in English, which was not one of her better languages. She could tell by the context, though, that it was from a news site, and she recognized Los Angeles in the logo. The single illustration (other than various advertisements in the margins) was of a burned-out car in the bottom of a gully.

Kaname scanned the contents, picking out what she could, all the while wondering why anyone would have wanted to give this to her or Momomi.

… Mulholland Drive, about two miles west of I-405…

… two bodies were recovered from the wreckage…

"What the hell?" Kaname whispered, but then she saw something that almost literally stopped her heart, and she felt her blood freeze in her veins.

… driver has been identified as twenty-year-old Hoshi Saiga, son of the CEO of Saiga Corp in Kyoto, Japan…

"Hoshi-kun..?" she whispered, frantically turning to the next page.

… passenger has not been identified, but police have confirmed that she was a Japanese woman of approximately age twenty…

… at first thought to be a single-car accident…

… further investigation showed that Saiga and his passenger had been shot in the back of the head…

… case now being treated as a murder…

… no suspects at this time, but the possibility of gang violence…

By now, Kaname's hands were trembling, and she was beginning to hyperventilate as she stared unblinking at this impossible news.

… Saiga Corp released a statement on behalf of their CEO…

… devastated by the loss…

… will offer any and all assistance to the LAPD…

… this story is still developing…

The article ended here, and Kaname frantically turned to the last page, only to find it to be a printed note.

Such a shame about Hoshi-kun. It is always unfortunate when children do not obey their fathers.

You never know what terrible things might happen.

Fortunately, he had a younger brother.

The pages fell from Kaname's nerveless fingers, and with an inarticulate cry of horror, she rose shakily to her feet and backed away from the fallen papers.

Then, she turned around, flung open the door, and ran.

Chikaru could not help but be amused by the looks on her dear ones' faces as she led them through a series of locked doors behind the student council chambers. "Are you sure it's okay for us to be back here?" Tamao asked.

"As President of St. Lulim, I am permitted to bring guests here at my discretion," Chikaru assured her.

"Yes, but where exactly is *here?* " Hazuki asked.

"I believe this will answer your question," Chikaru replied as she unlocked the last door and led them into…

"A changing room?" Tamao wondered aloud as she looked around at the shelves filled with small clothing bins.

"For the Student Council's private bath," Chikaru smiled. "That is, if the two of you would like to join me?"

Tamao and Hazuki looked at one another, then back at her. "Is this a trick question?" Hazuki asked.

"Not at all," said Chikaru, removing her bow tie, then sliding her tailcoat over her shoulders and finding a place to hang it up. "After the week I've had, I desperately need a good soak, so I, for one, will be having this bath. You are more than welcome to join me."

"Chikaru, are… are you sure?" Tamao stammered as Chikaru slipped off her vest and began unbuttoning her tuxedo shirt. "I mean… are you… ready for this?"

"We've shared a bath before, if memory serves," Chikaru winked, but then her face fell slightly. "There are… still things I am *not* ready for, my dearlings, but this is truly the least I could do after what I've put you through these past weeks."

"You had your reasons," Hazuki reminded her.

"Indeed I did, Hazuki-chan," Chikaru nodded as she unbuckled her tuxedo pants and stepped out of them, leaving her dressed in only a matched set of lacy black lingerie. "And I'd prefer to tell you about them in the bath, with no barriers between us."

Asexual or not, Chikaru found that she rather enjoyed the effect her choice of undergarments was having on the two of them. Without another word, they both began to undress as well, setting their discarded clothing in empty bins. Chikaru finished first, then took down three fluffy white towels from one of the top shelves.

Once they were undressed and had their hair pinned back, Chikaru led them toward the sliding door that connected the changing room with the bath itself, but before she opened it, she turned and looked back at them.

"Chikaru?" Tamao asked quietly.

"May I…?" Chikaru started to ask, but then she broke off and tried again. "May I just… look at you for a moment?"

Tamao and Hazuki exchanged glances again, then wordlessly faced her. Hazuki let the hand holding her towel fall to her side, and Tamao did the same.

For a long, silent while, Chikaru simply gazed at the two beautiful women who for some inexplicable reason wanted to share their lives with her. While she did not feel arousal at the sight of them any more than she had to this point, she certainly felt *something* : almost a sense of wonder, or awe, that she was being allowed this honor.

By the looks on their faces, they were feeling much the same. She could feel their eyes roaming over her, taking her in, simply enjoying her. She remembered a talk with Hazuki, now months ago, in which they had talked about the concept of nudity as trust. Even after her

selfish isolation, they were showing her, just by sharing that moment, that she had not lost that trust.

Perhaps someday soon she would reach out and see where that trust took them, as Hazuki had tried that night. Even if it took them nowhere, perhaps it was still worth the attempt.

"You're incredible, the pair of you," she whispered.

Hazuki let out a tiny giggle, but quickly tried to cover it. "Thank you, Chikaru."

"What was so funny?" Chikaru asked, setting her head to one side.

"I'm sorry," Hazuki chuckled, lowering her face to hide a blush. "I just suddenly wanted to ask if you meant my pair or her pair."

"Hazuki-chan," Tamao groaned. "Are the police still here? I need to report the killing of a moment."

"I'm sorry," Hazuki repeated, though she certainly didn't *look* sorry. "Maybe Kaname's sense of humor is rubbing off on me."

"Perhaps a good wash will take care of that, then," Chikaru smiled, reaching once again to open the door. "If you'll follow me, my loves?"

"Anywhere," said Tamao, but then she gasped softly as she got her first look at the room.

The council bath was, Chikaru would be the first to admit, decadence itself: all hand-carved dark wood and gold fixtures, with intricate mosaics of landscapes on every wall. The sunken bath was marble, natural rather than cultured, and easily big enough for thirty or forty.

It was also, to Chikaru's surprise, occupied. Apparently she had not been the only one in need of a post-opera soak.

Ayame and Sayuri were seated along the edge of the tub, the steaming water up to their collarbones, and Sayuri had her head

lying on Ayame's shoulder. They looked incredibly peaceful, particularly given recent events, and for a moment Chikaru wondered if she should quietly usher out her two companions and let the other girls have their privacy.

It was then that Ayame opened her coppery eyes. "Good evening," she smiled.

"Good evening," Chikaru replied. "Are we interrupting?"

"Nah," said Sayuri, still not opening her eyes. "I can't speak for both of us, but if I don't get out pretty soon I might melt."

"Sounds about right," Ayame chuckled. "Go ahead and wash up; we'll be on our way soon."

Chikaru, Tamao and Hazuki did as the Lulim secretary suggested, scrubbing off the last of the day's sweat and makeup before joining the other two girls in the tub.

"It hasn't quite set in that it's over," Ayame said at length.

"Give it a few days," Chikaru smiled. "Once you start wondering where all this spare time came from, then you'll realize it."

"I had a chance to talk to one of the representatives from the conservatory afterward," Sayuri said then. "She told me they were very impressed with our work."

"More than that," Ayame continued, "she's actually an alumnus of St. Spica, and she told us she was all too familiar with the politics of the yearly show, never mind the potential difficulties of shoehorning in a reluctant Étoile."

"What a coincidence," Chikaru laughed.

"They're going to give us their highest recommendation," said Sayuri, picking up her head from the other girl's shoulder and looking across

the tub at her class president. "I… can scarcely believe it. This morning I thought we were doomed."

"Maybe there's something to be said for those theater miracles after all," Ayame winked.

"We could never have done this without you, Chikaru," Sayuri said intently. "I mean, we couldn't have done it without *everyone* who performed today, obviously, but… *you* made this happen for us. As long as I live, I'll never forget this day. Thank you so much."

"It was the least I could do for the both of you," Chikaru said with a slight bow of the head.

"No, I don't think it was 'the least' anything," Ayame said quietly. "Thank you, Chikaru. For everything."

Chikaru found that she could not meet their eyes. "You're more than welcome, my friends."

A few minutes passed in silence, then Sayuri gave a slow, languid stretch. "Well, then, I imagine the three of you have a lot of catching up to do. Shall we, Ayame?"

"Indeed," Ayame smirked. "Good night, all."

After a soft chorus of good-nights, the two slipped out of the water, wrapped themselves in towels, then headed back to the changing room hand in hand, exchanging smiles as they went. A few minutes later, they heard the muffled click of the outer door closing.

"Chikaru… are they..?" Hazuki said at last.

"Are they what?"

Hazuki made a face. "I guess it's not my business, really, but… are they… *involved?* "

The question actually took Chikaru by surprise, because she had never known her assistants to be anything but friends. They had been roommates since their first year, certainly, and they were almost never seen apart, but she had never assumed they were more than that, even as difficult as it was to make such an assumption here on this hill.

But there had been something intimately cozy about the way Sayuri had been lying against Ayame's shoulder just then, and there was certainly a fondness in their eyes as they left hand in hand…

Where did they fall on the various scales? Even if they were not physically involved, was there a level of romance to their bond, separate from their sexuality?

"I honestly don't know the answer to that," she finally said. "But I'm also learning that I have much yet to discover about such things. Luckily, I have a lot of good reading material now…"

Tamao blushed, and Chikaru wondered if she had told Hazuki yet about that particular info-drop the other day. Rather than follow that thought, she took a deep breath and dove straight into the difficult part. "My darlings, please forgive me for shutting you out these past weeks. It was selfish of me, but the ugly truth of the matter is that I was… ashamed."

"Of the accident?" Hazuki asked.

"Chikaru, no one blames you for that," Tamao insisted.

"It's more complicated than that, I'm afraid," Chikaru sighed. "Bear with me, loves, and I'll tell you what I couldn't say then."

Each of them took one of her hands, and she smiled at the familiar comfort of their energy. "After the… accident, as you called it… did either of you have dreams? Memories you picked up from one of the others during that moment when we… merged?"

"Some of them weren't even dreams," Tamao said quietly. "Some of them even hit me when I was awake."

"Same," Hazuki nodded. "It was like the first time, when it was just the two of us."

Chikaru nodded, then asked the next question with obvious difficulty. "Tell me… did either of you witness the memory of my boon with Eve?"

Both girls shook their heads, and Chikaru let out the breath she had been holding. "In that case, I have a story to tell."

"Wasn't your boon the chance to draw her portrait?" Hazuki asked.

"Eventually it was, yes," Chikaru acknowledged. "But I'm afraid there's more to the story. I was talking to her about my sexuality, hoping to get her opinion on why it is that the desire for physical pleasure continues to elude me. In the end, she said that even *she* could not be sure whether this is simply who I am, or whether I had an awakening still to come. I said to her that I almost wanted to ask for that awakening as my boon."

"Chikaru," Tamao whispered.

"When she next spoke," Chikaru went on, "there was the oddest tone to her voice, and she told me that it was within her power to do that. I told her I could never be satisfied with that, because I'd always know it had to be… well, forced on me, and she went on to say that she could make it a gradual process, and that she could even replace the memory that I'd ever asked for it, so I could come to love you, and do so without guilt."

"She suggested that?" Hazuki asked in a monotone, and Chikaru could feel something dark stirring in the taller girl's *Souma* .

"To be fair, I don't think she was actually suggesting it," Chikaru said, shaking her head. "If anything, I think she was giving me a warning.

It occurred to me that I had come *very close* to asking for something that was within her power, and I think she was making it clear that if I had made that wish, she would have been oath-bound to grant it, and damn the consequences. I think she wanted to let me know that I needed to tread very carefully."

"You're giving her more credit than I would right now," Hazuki muttered.

"But you *didn't* ask for it," Tamao insisted. "You asked to draw her portrait instead… right?"

That tiny question in Tamao's voice was heartbreaking, but Chikaru knew that she deserved it. "Yes, I did," she said quietly. "But… my darlings, I didn't *want* to. I wanted to give in, and let her magic those feelings into me. I wanted it *so badly*…"

She felt the first tears come, and Tamao immediately cuddled more tightly against her, while Hazuki gripped her hand firmly. "You did the right thing," Tamao whispered.

"Did I, Tamao-chan?"

"Yes, you did!" Tamao insisted, looking up at her with blazing eyes. "Chikaru, if we ever make love, I want it to be because *you* want to, not because you *made yourself* want to!"

"Even if I'd never know the difference?"

"It would have come out eventually," Hazuki whispered. "Twice, now, I've regained memories that Eve tried to suppress. It would have gotten out. Would you have been able to live with it then?"

"Point made," Chikaru sighed. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't sorely tempted."

"Hey," Hazuki said, trying to catch her gaze. "What was it you said to me that time? You felt temptation, and you walked away. No kiss, no

foul. No harm done."

Chikaru shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't agree with that last part, though. Harm *was* done: not by what happened then, but by what came afterward."

"The accident?" Tamao asked again.

"More what led up to it," Chikaru explained. "By this time I knew that if I couldn't make those feelings appear by my own actions, I might come to regret not taking hold of the chance I'd had with my boon. So I started flirting more. I started touching more. I even gave you both… breast privileges." She couldn't help but crack a tiny smile as she repeated that term. "Then, I hit upon the idea of sharing our presences on a more permanent basis… and we all know how *that* turned out."

"No one blames you for that," Tamao said again.

"Well, to be more specific, none of *us* blame you for it," Hazuki added. "It's pretty clear that *someone* does, though."

"Indeed," Chikaru whispered. "And then, when we had that moment of… over-sharing, I was terrified that you would know. That you'd see how desperate I was becoming, and how tempted I'd been, and how close I'd come to happily living that lie just to be able to share my bed with you. Add to that what happened to poor Kagome, and… some other things that aren't my place to tell even you, and… I'm sorry, my darlings, but I couldn't face you. I couldn't let you see that."

"You could have," Hazuki assured her.

"I know," Chikaru nodded. "Or, at least, I know that *now* . Which is why I brought you here, my loves. I needed to lay myself bare… in more ways than one. I needed to *trust* you again, even if I couldn't trust myself."

Her two girlfriends (and it really *was* a sweet word) folded themselves into her, holding her warmly and securely between them. Then, in a single voice, they said the very words she needed to hear.

" *You can trust me with what's inside you."*

Chikaru smiled, and just let herself melt into their embrace, both physically and through their shared energy. "I love you, my darlings. Forgive me?"

"Already done," Tamao whispered, kissing her on the shoulder for good measure.

"A thousand years from now, this won't even be a blip on our radar," Hazuki chuckled.

"I'll hold you to that, Hazuki-chan."

"Please do…"

Kaname didn't stop running until she was well clear of the dormitory and most of the way to Spica. She was no longer thinking at this point: all she knew was that she had to hit something. This was how she eventually found herself in the gym, but the actual getting there was still a blur: had she swiped the spare key? Had she broken in? Did it matter at this point?

She threw off her pirate coat, then stepped up to the single heavy punching bag and laid into it bare-knuckled. The impact sent needles of pain up her arm, so she bit down on it and took another swing, then another, alternating lefts and rights into the unyielding leather and the thick sand beneath.

Hoshi-kun was dead.

Hoshi-kun, whose only crime was running away from his monster of a father. Hoshi-kun, who fled the country rather than subject himself

and Kaname to a nightmarish sham marriage. Hoshi-kun, who had turned out okay after all.

The bag was wet where Kaname was striking it. Was it sweat? Blood? Did it matter at this point?

The tears blurring her eyes made it impossible to tell.

Who had the girl been? A girlfriend, maybe, who had thrown caution to the wind and fled by his side, choosing a life on the run so long as she could stay with him? Did it matter at this point?

Whoever she was, she was still dead. Shot in the back of the head and then cooked in a burning car. Gang violence? Bullsh!t. This was a hit job, and she had landed directly in the line of fire.

She was punching so hard now that she heard the heavy chains holding the bag begin to rattle, along with a wet splattering sound every time she connected. She tried to concentrate on this, and only this: anything to keep the more terrifying thoughts from bubbling to the surface, but in the end, they would not be silent.

Was she in danger now, for defying Saiga? For defying her own father?

Was Momomi in danger?

When she landed the next right, she felt rather than heard something snap in her hand, and a literally blinding pain briefly overwhelmed her vision. Still she kept punching, trying to numb herself to it as she felt a second snap, then a third, so she screamed with each blow to cover the sound of it.

Kaname's father knew that she had a girlfriend, now that Kaname herself had so blithely and recklessly told him. If he could get that note to her dorm room, he could probably find out about Momomi easily enough, and then what?

Unbidden, the image of Momomi's charred body sitting in that burned-out car came to her mind's eye, and Kaname let loose with a thunderous punch that snapped the chains and sent the 50-kilo bag flying.

" *Get back here!"* she screamed at it, then threw herself down on the fallen bag and continued raining punches on it, punctuating each blow with a bellow of pain and rage.

As she reared back for another punch, though, a hand closed around her upper arm and held it in place. "You're hurting yourself."

There was a jolt of *Souma* from the contact, and for just a moment Kaname thought Hazuki had found her, and that Hazuki was seeing her like this.

" *Let go of me!"* she cried, trying to wrench her arm free, but the hand holding her was almost impossibly strong, as was the *Souma* that accompanied it. Her eyes cleared, and she found herself looking into an impassive face and concerned rose-colored eyes.

"You're hurting yourself," Ryofu said again.

" *I don't care!"* Kaname shrieked, finally yanking her arm away and staggering to her feet. " *That's all I do! If not me, then I'll just hurt someone else! I'm dangerous!"*

"Not to me," Ryofu whispered, rising to her feet to stand opposite her.

Kaname took a wild swing at the other *yami*, but Ryofu caught her broken hand mid-flight. Arcs of what felt like lightning shot through her arm, but Kaname could not tell if it was Ryofu's *Souma*, or just her own pain.

" *You need to stay away from me!"* Kaname went on screaming. " *They'll get you too! They'll get anyone who gets close to me! I told you, I'm dangerous! They'll come for you too!"*

"Let them," said Ryofu, letting her gaze bore into the much younger girl.

Kaname tried to struggle, to resist, to flee, to do anything, but in the end she was not strong enough, and she slowly collapsed to her knees, her breath coming in great, wailing sobs. Ryofu wordlessly knelt beside her and held her close.

There, with the arms of the peerless general wrapped protectively around her, Kaname closed her eyes to the pain and just let the green of their shared *Souma* overcome her, until she could feel nothing else.

NEXT: Epilogue

NOTE: "The Pirates of Penzance" was composed by W.S. Gilbert (book) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (music), and is in the public domain

Epilogue and Author's Notes

Leaving ain't fair, you know - parting ain't just

People got to move on, people got to do what they must

And we're back together again

And I'm never gonna lose you as a friend

-Indigo Girls

Epilogue

While the naginata team had made great strides in its first months of existence, it was not until the following academic year that things really began to take off, and the masked butterflies of Astraea Hill became a force to be reckoned with, first in local tournaments, and eventually culminating in this: their first trip to an invitational in Tokyo.

As important as the tournament was, though, Hazuki was finding herself even more excited about the prospect of seeing Chikaru again: she and Shizuma would be making the short trek from the university to see them in action this weekend, and afterward, Hazuki and Tamao were going to get a chance to see the house they were renting (and which, test scores willing, they would also be occupying within a year).

For now, though, as they made their "camp" in the stands of the indoor arena, Hazuki let her mind switch to coach-mode, and she looked over her cluster of fighters as they chatted and relaxed while waiting for the first-round matches to begin. She liked their chances in the lower division, with Tsubomi and more recently Kagome having made great strides. The senior tier was a question mark,

though: Kizuna and Remon, now in the first year of upper-division play, were facing stiffer competition than they were used to, Yaya seemed to be stuck on the verge of turning that last corner, Noriko was brilliant when she managed to check her anger (which was not often enough), and Nagisa had made the hard decision to temporarily leave the team to concentrate on her studies and Étoile duties. They had done well enough at the regional level, but this was a much bigger stage than any they had seen thus far.

Still, spirits were high, and the girls looked far more excited than nervous.

Hazuki was also grateful that Tamao had talked her way into accompanying them on the trip, insisting that an Étoile should be here for this first national naginata invitational in the history of the three schools. Nagisa had been kindness itself in deferring to her counterpart, even though it meant she would be missing out on a chance to see Shizuma. (Tamao had, in return, promised to cover for Nagisa the next time Shizuma came out to the vacation home.)

In the end, they *felt* Chikaru approaching even before they saw her, and no sooner had the former Lulim president and the former Étoile found their encampment than Chikaru found herself practically tackled by her two now-long-distance girlfriends. It felt like forever since the last time their *Souma* had touched, and the rejoined energy sang through them as they shared a happy embrace.

The butterflies let out a series of squees and awwwws, along with one shout of "Kiss her!" (probably from Noriko). To be honest, Hazuki was very tempted to do so, now that kissing was an indulgence Chikaru was willing to share, but there would be plenty of time for that later.

"My goodness, my darlings, I have the oddest feeling that you missed me," Chikaru giggled.

"Whatever gave you *that* idea?" Tamao sighed happily.

Suddenly aware that Kizuna and Remon were close by, obviously torn between their vicarious appreciation for the threesome and their own desire to hug their onee-sama silly, Hazuki and Tamao turned to greet Chikaru's silver-haired companion as well. "Shizuma-san," Hazuki bowed, erring on the side of politeness: even now, she was not entirely sure where she and Shizuma stood in terms of familiarity.

Tamao, on the other hand, had no such uncertainty. "Shizuma!" she grinned, throwing herself at the taller girl and hugging her tightly.

"Well, you're not Nagisa, but you'll do in a pinch," Shizuma said with a theatrical sigh.

"Rude," Tamao giggled, not looking at all offended.

"It's wonderful to see you, Tamao-chan," Shizuma laughed. "As for you, Hazuki-chan, I've told you before that you can drop the -san. Or are you in warrior mode right now?"

"No, she's just star-struck," Tamao teased.

"If I may interrupt the happy reunion?" came another voice. The cluster of students (and former students) looked up to see that Kojima-sensei had returned and was giving them a sarcastic smile. "Azuma-san, let's talk," said the coach, giving a little head-gesture indicating that Hazuki was to follow.

Hazuki found Chikaru's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Don't go anywhere," she smiled.

"You needn't worry," Chikaru giggled.

With a last smile and nod to Shizuma, Hazuki followed her teacher up the stairs from their place in the grandstands. "What is it, sensei?"

Kojima-sensei turned to Hazuki and gave her an appraising look. "Did you bring your gear for this trip?"

It was a fair question, since Hazuki did not actually compete in any of their tournaments. "I did, yes."

"Good, good," the sensei nodded. "Do you feel up for an exhibition match today?"

"A what, now?"

"Tell me, Azuma-san. Are you at all familiar with the St. Francesca Academy?"

Hazuki blinked. "Not… really? Just that they have a solid reputation in the sport."

"You're telling me you - *you*, of all people - didn't exhaustively study the competition before we came here today?"

"I…" Hazuki stammered, glancing down the stairs toward Chikaru. "I was preoccupied."

Kojima-sensei's stern mask broke, and she gave a bark of laughter. "I should give you *so* much sh!t right now, but I'll go easy on you this time. Anyway, I just found myself personally sought out by the sensei from St. Francesca, and it sounds like you've caught their team's attention."

"But… how?" Hazuki asked. "I don't compete."

"No, but any team that has a fifth-dan master as a student coach is going to raise a few eyebrows. As it turns out, they're in a similar situation: they have student coaches of their own, and one of them has specifically asked for the chance to have a match with you."

"Who?" Hazuki asked, baffled by the very prospect.

"I didn't catch the name," Kojima-sensei said with a dismissive wave, "but she's a fifth-dan, just like you. So what do you say, Azuma-san? Do you think you might be able to find a setting somewhere between teach and kill? 'Show off,' maybe?"

Hazuki thought about this. After everything Kojima-sensei had done for her these past two years, she did not want to let her down, but the thought of fighting an actual match against someone without *Souma* was still not something she was comfortable with, fifth-dan or not.

Still, it had been couched as an exhibition, and the teacher in her could definitely work with that idea.

"Okay, I'll give it a shot," she nodded.

"Good!" Kojima-sensei grinned, slapping her roughly on the shoulder. "You have twenty minutes to warm up."

"Wait, what?"

All too soon, Hazuki found herself geared up, naginata in hand, standing at one end of the very center sparring square, with her team clustered around one side, and a group of girls presumably from St. Francesca at the other. Somehow, the word of this exhibition match had spread like wildfire, and the stands looked far more filled than they had been just fifteen minutes before.

One of the officiants came out to the center, microphone in hand, and addressed the crowd. "Good morning, and welcome to the AJNF Autumn Invitational! Before we begin the first round, we have arranged for a special exhibition match between two very talented students!"

"Why do I feel like he's about to ask us to get ready to rumble?" Hazuki muttered.

"I didn't think it was going to be quite like this," said Kojima-sensei, which was as close to an apology as she was likely to give. "Obviously St. Francesca has some pull with the AJNF if they could turn it into this level of spectacle on such short notice."

"You'll do great, Hazuki-chan," Tamao assured her.

"Just remember what the samurai fights for, my sweet," Chikaru winked.

The announcer went on to give a bit of a disclaimer, notifying all that both of these girls were fifth-degree black belts and assistant instructors to their respective teams, and would thus be performing at a level which could be dangerous to emulate. Also, as this was an exhibition, it would go the full five minutes rather than stopping once one of them scored two points.

"Fighters, take your positions!" he then thundered into his microphone.

Hazuki resisted the urge to roll her eyes, and stepped out into the sparring square, sizing up her opponent as she did. She appeared to be somewhere between a hundred seventy and a hundred seventy-five centimeters in height, so Hazuki would have the advantage of reach. Even in sparring gear, she was very light on her feet, her steps almost dance-like, and her every motion was smooth and liquid.

"My, my," the other girl said to her, pitching her voice so that only Hazuki would hear. "Is that a butterfly on your mask? How novel."

"It is," Hazuki said, narrowing her eyes. Was this girl going to try to trash-talk her at an AJNF-sponsored event?

"Tiger swallowtail, I believe? Good choice."

"I wear this for a dear friend," Hazuki said evenly.

"A dear friend, eh?" the other girl said, her voice now a bit warmer. "I'm sure she feels very honored, Azuma-dono."

Azuma-dono? No one had called her that since…

"From the academies of Astraea Hill, *Azuma Hazuki!* " the announcer went on. "And from St. Francesca Academy, *Kotatsu Sei!* "

"Spar with me, Azuma-dono?" her opponent said in an amused tone.

Hazuki felt as though the world was slowing to a halt all around her, even as her mind spun out of control as she frantically tried to transliterate the kanji in her head. Kotatsu? Zilong? *Shiryuu?!*

She chanced a look at the crowd of girls from St. Francesca, and her eyes found two familiar figures, one with a long brown topknot, and the other with luxurious black hair tied into a side-tail. They were younger now - probably about Hazuki's age - but there was no mistaking them as anyone but Bachou Mouki and Kan'u Unchou. Both girls grinned at her, and Kan'u even gave her a *bao quan* gesture across the distance.

She looked back at her opponent, for the first time noticing the familiar violet of her eyes. " *Sei?!"*

"I made a promise, Hazuki," Chou'un smiled. "Now why don't you show me some of the things you've been teaching in my name?"

There were so many questions she wanted to ask, and so many things she needed to say, but there was a note of challenge in Chou'un's voice, and Hazuki realized that it would have to be first things first. She slipped into her fighting stance, but did not even try to hold back her smile. "Oh, it is *on* ."

The End

"Strange Fire" by R.A. Fletcher (Suzume CA)

4 February 2010 - 4 February 2020 (… holy crap)

AUTHOR'S NOTES

We made it.

Azuma Hazuki, Azuma Hatsumi (Eve), Lilith, Aaya, Ken-chan, Sumeragi Youko, Milka, Yamiyama, this specific version of Tamamo no Mae, the Hat of the Keepers, the Universal Garden, and the Great Library are from ***Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito*** , created by Root/Carnelian and animated by Studio Deen, which has finally been released to the west (but get your copies while you can, folks).

These renditions of Ryofu Housen (Ren), Chou'un Shiryuu (Sei), Kan'u Unchou (Aisha), Bachou Mouki (Sui), Chouhi Yokutoku (Rin Rin), Shoukatsuryou Koumei (Shuri), Kouchuu Kanshou (Shion), Ryuubi Gentoku (Touka), Riri, Sousou Moutoku (Karin), Kakouton Genjou (Shunran), Kakouen Myousai (Shuuran), Jun'iku Bunjaku (Keifa), Kazuto Hongo, and the St. Francesca Academy are from ***Koihime Musou*** (and its various sequels) created by BaseSon and animated by Dogakobo. (Hongo-san only shows up in the visual novels, thank heavens.)

I had to go with a few more original characters this time, including Kojima Takako, Nakahara Sakiya, Narumi Kaede, Saiga Hoshi, Konno Shin, Kinoshita Kazuharu, and probably a few others I'm forgetting. (I defer credit for the fathers of Kaname and Kagome.)

All other characters are from ***Strawberry Panic*** , created by Sakurako Kimino and animated by Madhouse

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Opening lyrics were from various songs by Indigo Girls (Emily Saliers and Amy Ray):

From STRANGE FIRE (1989) : Strange Fire (1, 20), Crazy Game (6), I Don't Wanna Know (25)

From INDIGO GIRLS (1989) : Prince of Darkness (9)

From RITES OF PASSAGE (1992) : Ghost (7)

From SWAMP OPHELIA (1994) : Fugitive (8, 23)

From 1200 CURFEWS (1995) : Back Together Again (Ep.)

From COME ON NOW SOCIAL (1999) : Gone Again (15)

From RETROSPECTIVE (2000) : Devotion (13, 16)

From ALL THAT WE LET IN (2004) : Perfect World (2, 3), Heartache for Everyone (4, 5), Dairy Queen (10), Come On Home (17)

From POSEIDON AND THE BITTER BUG (2009) : Second Time Around (11), Salty South (14), Love of our Lives (21, 22, 25)

From BEAUTY QUEEN SISTER (2011) : Able to Sing (12), Feed and Water the Horses (18, 19)

In my dream anime adaptation, the opening song would be *Strange Fire* (go figure), and my original thought for the ending theme was *Love of our Lives*, but… that might actually be better as an OP for Book III…

Other opening lyrics include "Baba O'Reilly" by The Who (Townshend), "Wish The Lads Were Here (Including the Ballad of 32)" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood (Gill, Johnson, Nash, O'Toole), "Tomorrow" by Ladytron (Aroyo, Hunt, Marnie, Wu), and "Shambala" by Three Dog Night, among others (Moore).

Ten years is entirely too long to take, and I am grateful to everyone who stuck it out with me for the duration. Will there be a Book III? I'm honestly not sure. The above shows are well over a decade old now (except the KM sequels), the fanbase has dwindled accordingly, and on a personal note, my real-life daughters are now the ages of some of the cast members. Which is no end of awkward, let me tell you.

On the other hand, I think Nine might kill me if I don't continue, given where things left off with Kaname.

(On another other hand, Nine's been keeping us waiting too. More Gravity of Love, please and thanks? Yes, I am a jerk.)

At any rate, my intention going in was to have Book III finish out the school year and catch us up with the original epilogue. I had also considered giving it an M rating so that I don't have to keep censoring Kaname, and because let's face it: people in love sometimes do rated-M things. (No actual porn, though. You folks don't want to see me try to write porn. No, seriously.)

I'd love to hear what you all think, of course. For now, I really should finish up the HOTD crossover and the second Tessellation story. Plus, there's this Vocaloid project I've been wanting to write for literally years now, and…

I guess we'll see?

Meanwhile, before I go…

Chikaru and Tamao were already in the onsen by the time Shizuma found Hazuki standing on the back porch, still wrapped in her towel, taking in her surroundings with a careful eye.

"Aren't you going to join them, Hazuki-chan?" she asked, stepping up beside the taller girl.

"Just checking visibility," Hazuki replied.

"I assure you, no one can see us here," Shizuma smiled. "Nothing but mountainside behind us, and the bamboo grows high enough to give us cover from the sides. I understand this place used to be a hot springs inn, and they took privacy seriously."

"Isn't it an awful lot of house for just two people, though?"

"We've been over this," Shizuma chuckled. "It's a lot for *two*, but it would be much nicer with *five* . Now go join the others in the water, silly."

Hazuki looked over at her, and furrowed her brow. "You're still dressed. Are you getting in?"

"Hmm, I prefer not to at this time of the month."

"Ah, sorry," Hazuki blushed.

Shizuma shook her head, then paused to take a sip of her wine. "I do love to use the bath whenever possible, though. I can't tell you how many times Chikaru and I have come out here to relax and unwind after a hard day of studying."

"Oh, really?"

"Mm hmm," she nodded, feeling a sly smile coming on. "It's quite a privilege, getting to share an onsen with a beauty like Chikaru. Don't get me wrong, my heart belongs to Nagisa only, but… your darling is an enchanting vision, truly."

"Indeed she is," Hazuki agreed, giving Shizuma a sidelong look.

"Just think of it, Hazuki-chan," Shizuma continued, leaning in more closely. "Wouldn't it be nice to be able to share this bath with her every night, if you wished? Daily skinship with the ones you love, sharing a home with nothing but space and privacy, along with two very understanding housemates who will likely be seeking much of the same?"

Hazuki was beginning to blush, and Shizuma knew she had hit her mark. "So," she whispered in an echo of her best seductive voice, "how are the mock entrance exams going?"

"Not too bad," Hazuki said carefully, looking fixedly at the short bamboo wall that shielded the onsen (and the other two girls) from

their sight. "I… think I could still fit in some extra study, though…"

"See that you do," Shizuma chuckled. "Now, I'm going to go inside and finish my wine, and you…" she tapped Hazuki on her bare shoulder, "are going to join the others in the water and get a taste of the rewards that await the studious."

"Yes, ma'am."